

Voices of Empowerment: The Role of Kansas City Based NGOs in Immigrant  
Women's Experiences of Empowerment By

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this dissertation, I examine how non-governmental organizations (NGOs), situated in the global North, contribute to immigrant women's experiences of empowerment. Oftentimes NGOs are hampered by neoliberal cutbacks in social services. Consequently, these organizations rely more and more on financial support from larger international organizations and foundations, which creates more bureaucratized and hierarchical organizational structures that lead to unequal relations of power between the organization and its clientele. These unequal relations of power impede the organizations' ability to effectively provide services and perform functions of empowerment. Given the constraints these organizations face, I examine if NGOs have addressed these problems, and to what extent they have restructured their organizations so that the immigrant women have a more active and participatory role within the organization and within their community. Drawing upon interviews with forty immigrant women participants and NGO staff members, I find that that the three Kansas City based NGOs in this study have devised innovative and creative ways to counter these challenges so they can more effectively serve their immigrant women clients and contribute to the immigrant women's process of empowerment.

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*For my mother and grandmother*

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## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary global era is characterized by growing inequalities between wealthier, industrialized countries in the global North (such as the United States and countries within the EU) and poorer, less industrialized countries in the global South (such as countries in Africa and Latin America). These inequalities extend beyond differences in levels of income to include disparities in education, nutrition, health, and political freedom. As the lives of people living in the global South have become more precarious, they are often forced to migrate to areas in the global North. Due to the increase in instances of migration, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the global North have emerged to address the needs of immigrants, particularly women, during their period of resettlement.

The period of political and economic transition in post-communist Eastern Europe engendered a revival in the importance of civil society - a sphere of political associations not formally associated with the state - for not only political stability but also for economic development through the establishment of a thriving market-based economy. The period of transition in Eastern Europe also led to an interest in the democratization process occurring in other parts of the developing world, such as countries in Latin America and Africa. Given the belief that political stability generates economic development, international finance institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank and the IMF, and International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), such as the United Nations, began to allocate a portion of funds for economic development to organizations in civil society, such as NGOs. While a variety of

organizations comprise civil society, NGOs, which tend to be more established institutionally and bureaucratically, were easier for international donors to identify with than the more amorphous and transitory movement-based associations (Rai 2002).

In the years immediately following World War II reconstruction efforts, economic development initiatives were instituted as part of the IFIs' modernization approach to development to help developing countries catch up with Western capitalist countries. This modernization approach instituted development policies and plans informed by modernization theory – a theory arguing that capitalism could successfully be implemented in developing countries with the same five step plan as in the West (Rostow 1960). However, loans given in accordance with modernization plans did not result in successful economic development and, furthermore, caused accumulation of debt in many developing countries. As a consequence, IFIs started granting conditional loans through the 1980s and 1990s to developing countries on the basis that the country would undergo severe economic restructuring, which included adopting neoliberal oriented austerity measures that cut social spending and implemented trade liberalization policies. Neo-liberal ideologies of free market and *laissez faire* government constitute the basis for many of the austerity measures implemented through these conditional loans. Rather than helping developing countries to economically flourish, these austerity measures, in most cases, have drawn developing countries further and further into debt, exacerbating the inequalities and impoverished conditions in



these countries (Everett and Charlton 2014; McMichael 2008; Runyan and Peterson 2014).

As economic restructuring plans cut spending on public programs and services, like medical care, and education, *women* are the first to be affected. Women work more hours to be able to compensate for the lack of state-sponsored subsidies and to be able to afford social services that are now privatized (Beneria and Feldman 1992; Moghadam 1993; Sadasivam 1997; Sparr 1994a; Sparr 1994b; Stearns 2002; Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006). Austerity measures also affect women's health. For example, women are less likely to receive medical care during pregnancy, resulting in an increase in infant mortality and maternal mortality rates.

Countries in the Global North also experienced economic difficulties during the 1970s and 1980s as they were faced with rising unemployment rates and problems with inflation along with a crisis of overaccumulation, which occurs when "idle capital and idle labor supply . . . exist side by side with no apparent way to bring these idle resources together to accomplish socially useful tasks" (Harvey 1989: 180). Economists began to point to forms of labor and capital that were geographically fixed as well as solid ties between big labor, big government, and big capital as the main factors contributing to the crisis of overaccumulation (Harvey 1989). The introduction of more flexibility and mobility into the international and domestic economic systems answered the crisis of accumulation. Labor became more flexible through the creation of more temporary, part-time, and subcontracting forms of labor. To prevent another financial crises, such as the Great Depression in the 1930s, the U.S. government also began to print as much currency

as was needed. At the same time, financial deregulation resulted in nation-states relaxing their control over the flow of capital into and out of their borders. The increase in deregulation and financial innovation in conjunction with more instantaneous communications technology has created a global financial system, characterized as "a single world market for money and credit supply" (Harvey 1989: 161). Within this global financial system, there has been an increase in the unregulated flow of capital, goods, services, and people across now porous national borders. *It is within this context of the contemporary global era that I examine how NGOs, situated in the global North, contribute to immigrant women's experiences of empowerment.* While these NGOs' goals are to serve immigrant women during their period of resettlement, they are hampered by neoliberal cutbacks in social services. Consequently, these organizations rely more and more on financial support from larger international organizations and foundations, which creates more bureaucratized and hierarchical organizational structures that lead to unequal relations of power between the organization and its clientele. These unequal relations of power impede the organizations' ability to effectively provide services and perform functions of empowerment. *Given the constraints these organizations face, I examine if NGOs have addressed these problems, and to what extent they have tried to devise innovative ways to restructure their organizations so that the immigrant women have a more active and participatory role within the organization and within their community.*

In this dissertation, I will specifically examine how Kansas City based NGOs contribute to immigrant women's experiences of empowerment. I will be focusing

on Kansas City because it has become one of the primary locations, along with other Midwestern Cities such as Minneapolis, for the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement of the immigrant population. This is because basic conditions for successful resettlement, such as housing and employment opportunities, are easier to secure. NGOs in Kansas City, some of which receive financial support from the UNHCR, have emerged as the increasing number of immigrants settling in Kansas City require assistance. Furthermore, some of these NGOs, as exhibited through statements on their websites and demonstrated through their activities and programs, are committed to not only assisting immigrant women with the process of resettlement but also *empowerment*.

My study of Kansas City based NGOs is guided by the following questions. What are the various ways NGOs construct the notion of empowerment in the context of globalization? How do NGOs contribute to the empowerment of immigrant women in the global North? In particular, how does donor aid influence the professionalization and bureaucratization of NGOs and how does this bureaucratic structure of NGOs contribute to the unequal relations of power between NGOs' staff members and the immigrant women clientele? How representative of the interests of the immigrant population are these NGOs? How do relations of power affect the accountability of these organizations to the immigrant clientele the organization serves? What are the innovative ways NGOs have restructured their organizations in order to build a more equitable and participatory relationship with their immigrant women clientele?

In this dissertation, empowerment for the immigrant women is a process rather than an end goal. Agency is a significant component in this process of empowerment as it contributes to the immigrant women adopting a more active and participatory role within the NGOs. As the immigrant women participants become more active and participatory within the organization, they adopt more leadership roles, becoming teachers and mentors to other women participants. In addition, the staff members demonstrate a willingness to incorporate the immigrant women into the development of the organization's programs and activities. Agency, therefore, also serves to counter any potential unequal relations of power within the organization as it engenders more horizontal and participatory relationships between the NGO staff members and immigrant women clientele.

The NGOs' commitment to egalitarian relationships between the staff members and the immigrant women participants is also evident in the compatibilities in the notions of empowerment between the staff and the clientele. Both the staff members and immigrant women's notions of empowerment shared ideas of community engagement, the importance of emotional support, and increasing women's self-confidence. These compatibilities in notions of empowerment between staff members and clientele are significant as they demonstrate that participants are defining, to a certain extent, their process of empowerment as they participate in the programs and activities of the organization.

These shared notions of empowerment between staff members and clientele also indicate downward accountability within the organization. Downward accountability, in particular, is an important part of the empowerment process as it

facilitates an opening up of the organization to its members and encourages the participants to have more control over the NGO, incorporating them into the development and planning of activities and programs within the organization. This also creates an organizational environment that is better representative of what the immigrant women participants believe is important to their own process of empowerment. When organizations balance downward accountability to their participants with upward accountability to funding agencies, the organizations are also more able to engage authentic representation of the immigrant women's experiences of the process of empowerment.

This process of empowerment is also significant for the immigrant women's lives outside of the organization. The immigrant women experience an expansion of roles within their family that extend beyond caregiver, as they become providers and contribute financially to the well-being of their family. The immigrant women's participation within the organization also increases their visibility within the broader American community. This contributes to the immigrant women's process of empowerment as it functions to make the immigrant women feel more valued and increases their perceptions of self-worth. This also helps the participants recognize their capability and competency. These messages are significant for the immigrant women's process of empowerment as it counters any possible negative or disempowered stereotypes of the immigrant women as passive recipients of social services.

In this dissertation, I examine three NGOs that engage in empowerment projects that focus on financial independence, entrepreneurial activity, and skill building: *New Roots for Refugees*, *Mattie Rhodes Center*, and *Keeler Women's Center*.

## **Profiles of the NGOs in this Study**

### ***New Roots for Refugees***

*New Roots for Refugees* is a part of the Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas City's family stabilization program for immigrants and refugees resettling in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Catholic Charities resettles 150 refugees and 500 secondary migrants, who were originally resettled in another city, but unable to find work, moved here to Kansas City because of the availability of jobs for unskilled labor in factories and meat processing plants. Of those refugees and secondary migrants that seek assistance from Catholic Charities, twenty families participate in the community garden and seventeen farmers are enrolled in the farmer-training program. As evidenced on the organization's website, participants are not required to adhere to a particular religious belief in order to participate in the program.

Although, technically, *New Roots* is considered part of the Catholic Charities resettlement program, *New Roots* is able to operate somewhat independently as the program seeks the majority of its own funding and donor support. *New Roots* is primarily funded by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Through this funding agency, the organization has several grants, including some with the Beginner Farm Ranch and Development Program and the Community Food Project. However, the organization also receives

smaller contributions from private donors. As a smaller subsidiary of Catholic Charities, *New Roots* employs five to six staff members, including interns and full time volunteers.

*New Roots* was first conceptualized in 2004 because Catholic Charities was resettling a large number of refugees from Somalia at that time. Through their women's services program, they identified that a large number of women had agricultural experience in the countries they came from and wanted to start a community garden. Once the community garden was established, they decided to expand the program to turn the agricultural interests into a business opportunity for the women.

This organization has created an immigrant-led and cultivated garden that sells produce at farmers' markets and through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. As part of the program, immigrant and refugee participants agree to a five-year program plan that, upon graduation, enables them to independently produce fruits and veggies to sell at farmers' markets and through CSA programs. As stated on their website, their goals for the immigrant farmers are

[to] help refugee women put down new roots by helping them to start their own small farm businesses growing and selling vegetables. As their farm businesses become established and they develop more skills, they move to greater financial and managerial independence. Eventually they are able to move onto their own land and operate independently. (*New Roots for Refugees*. 2013. "About Us" Retrieved December 18, 2013).

Each participant in *New Roots* is given a quarter acre at Juniper Gardens in Kansas City, Kansas for the five years that they are in the program. During the first year, *New Roots* provides everything the participants need, including seeds, water, fertilizer, farmers' market fees, and tools. In the second year, the participant is then

expected to pay for his or her own seeds. In the third year, the participant pays for their own seeds and water, and in the fourth year, seeds, water, and tools. By the fifth year, the participant funds everything they need to grow and sell their produce, including farmers' market fees. Some participants have graduated before the five-year limit, successfully purchasing their own home or land to produce their crops.

Attendance at the farmer training workshops is required for farmers to participate in the program. In these workshops, participants learn various watering methods, how to use pesticides and fertilizers organically, and which seeds and plants are best to grow. In addition, farmers learn how to market their vegetables for sale at the farmer's markets with tips about making their booths attractive, and how to determine quantity and price when selling their produce. Workshops also instruct the participants on how to budget their earnings from the sale of their produce for paying taxes and saving to invest in their future enterprise. In addition to farmer training workshops, participants are also required to attend English as a Second Language classes.

### ***Mattie Rhodes Center***

*Mattie Rhodes Center* started in the early 1900s through Mattie Rhodes, a young woman involved in community service through her church organization. Upon a fatal contraction of typhoid fever, she asked that her savings of \$500 be used to benefit those impoverished in the Kansas City area. Since then, the *Mattie Rhodes Center* has developed into a larger NGO in Kansas City that has come to specialize in serving the Latino population over the past thirty years. *Mattie Rhodes* promotes civic engagement and leadership among the Hispanic population in the surrounding



local neighborhoods. As stated on their website,

Mattie Rhodes Center recognizes the importance of engaging residents in the neighborhoods in which they live, building strong leaders to advocate on their own behalf and on behalf of their communities. Community liaisons engage neighborhood residents and partners to make lasting changes. Mattie Rhodes works to empower individuals to be leaders, giving them the tools they need to help themselves and work for their communities. (*Mattie Rhodes Center*. 2013. "Community Engagement" Retrieved December 18, 2013).

*Mattie Rhodes* provides a variety of programs for the Latino population, including parenting classes, domestic violence prevention programs, mental health services, health and wellness programs, and youth-based arts programs. The activities in these programs include music lessons for the youth, art camps, farmers' markets, community gardens, Zumba classes for women in the local neighborhoods, and soccer programs for children. These services are available to anyone regardless of their religious beliefs or affiliation.

The staff of about forty people at *Mattie Rhodes* is also very diverse in their duties and the organization is large enough that it has two locations. In addition to mental health counselors, the organization employs six senior management team members, a lead grant writer, a senior fundraiser, two community organizers, and administrative staff at each location.

Women become involved with the organization for a variety of reasons. Some get involved through the daily Zumba classes the organization offers. Others become acquainted with *Mattie Rhodes* through the parenting classes and mental health services the organization offers. Yet others come to the program through health and wellness programs offered in their children's schools. *Mattie Rhodes* is also regarded as a local resource for the Hispanic community in the Kansas City

neighborhoods of the historic Northeast and Westside, and is often the women's first choice in their search for help to address any issues they are facing.

### ***Keeler Women's Center***

The *Keeler Women's Center*, founded by the Benedictine Sisters of Mount Saint Scholastica, works to empower impoverished immigrant women in urban Kansas City through offering life skills based workshops and some mental health services. Although the *Keeler Women's Center* staff members are Benedictine Sisters, the organization does not require immigrant women to adhere to a particular religious belief in order to receive services. Over time, the center has come to serve immigrant women as they live geographically close to the women's center and are oftentimes in need of the services they offer. The organization serves about forty to fifty immigrant women each month by offering life skills workshops, such as financial literacy workshops and Easy English classes, as well as holds support groups for local area residents such as knitting circles and health and wellness groups. In addition, the staff members that oversee the support groups organize outings for the immigrant women, such as picnics, trips to museums, and luncheons. The Keeler Women's Center also takes donations of household and children's goods, which are then available for the immigrant women free of charge.

Similar to Mattie Rhodes, *Keeler Women's Center* is known as a local resource center for women in the nearby Kansas City, Kansas neighborhoods. *Keeler Women's Center* partners with a number of other organizations in Kansas City and always strives to help connect women with the resources and assistance they need

from other organizations if the *Keeler Women's Center* itself is unable to help the women.

*Keeler Women's Center* sustains its activities and programs through some grants, private donations, benefit fundraisers, and volunteer contributions. The center also partners with Catholic Charities as Catholic Charities offers them a portion of their building space to use rent-free and the two organizations often refer participants to each other.

The three organizations in this study have been in existence for a number of years. Whereas Mattie Rhodes has been operating for over one hundred years, the Keeler Women's Center has been in existence for ten years and New Roots for Refugees has been operating for five years. All three serve participants in the Kansas City metropolitan area. More specifically, New Roots and Keeler Women's Center are based in the Kansas City, Kansas area, while Mattie Rhodes is based in Kansas City, Missouri.

While all three organizations have programs and activities that serve immigrant participants, each organization began in its own unique way. Mattie Rhodes, the longest organization in existence, has been operating since the 1900s, providing shelter and basic necessities to single mothers, homeless, and the elderly. In the 1950s, based on community needs assessment, Mattie Rhodes began to offer more mental health and social service programs and in the 1980s, due to a growing demand for social services for Spanish speaking members of the Kansas City community, it began to hire bilingual case managers and therapists. Today, Mattie Rhodes continues to offer mental health and social service programs that

predominately serve the Spanish speaking population of Kansas City. The Keeler Women's Center, similar to Mattie Rhodes, developed out of a desire to assist impoverished women in the Kansas City area. With the efforts of the Benedictine Sister of the Mount Saint Scholastica, the center originated with a more holistic approach to women's empowerment as exemplified in their mission statement that their goal is to "empower impoverished women in the urban core of Kansas City through education, advocacy, and personal and spiritual development" (*Benedictine Sisters Mount St. Scholastica*. 2013. "Our Mission" Retrieved December 18, 2013).

New Roots for Refugees diverges the most from the other two organizations in its inception as it developed out of the resettlement services that Catholic Charities offers. Staff members found that many of the newly arriving immigrants asked for gardens in order to grow food for their family members. As stated on their website, they quickly found that not only did their farmer training program offer refugees a way to provide food for themselves and their families and improve their economic situation, but "agriculture allows them to put down new roots, metaphorically and literally, and to become citizens who produce and give to their new communities." (*New Roots for Refugees*. 2013. "About Us" Retrieved December 18, 2013).

These Kansas City based organizations have attempted to restructure their organizations in ways that have eliminated some of the internal hierarchies of power between the organizations' staff members and immigrant clientele. As they perform several services to improve the lives of immigrant women, these NGOs have recognized that their programs and activities have not been compatible with the realities of the everyday experiences of immigrant women during the resettlement

process, and have restructured their organizations so that they are more accountable to their clientele than to their donors. In addition, these organizations have encouraged their clientele to assume more participatory roles within the organization, creating a more equitable and open relationship between the NGOs' staff and the immigrant clients.

The immigrant women participants in these programs migrate primarily from Burma (Myanmar) and Mexico due to either political or economic difficulties in their home country. For example, Burma has been under the control of the military since 1962. In addition, since independence from Britain's colonial rule in 1948, ongoing civil wars have been a problem in Burma, particularly with ethnic conflicts erupting between the many ethnic minorities within Burma such as the Karen, Lahu and Shan people. Those families who escaped the political oppression of the military dictatorship in Burma oftentimes have spent ten to fifteen years in refugee camps in Thailand before resettling in the Kansas City area. In contrast, many of the immigrant women from Mexico migrated here with their families fifteen to twenty years ago in search of better economic opportunities. An economic recession and wage devaluation in Mexico's economy and a need for cheaper labor in the United States were some of the push and pull factors for immigration from Mexico to the United States that peaked in the 1990s (Chiquiar and Salcedo 2013; Rosenblum et. al. 2012).

As these immigrant women and their families resettle in the Kansas City area, women are more apt to seek services to assist their families while they secure housing and stable employment. As women are primarily responsible for caregiving

duties within the families, they are more likely than men to seek out assistance and therefore are more likely to become involved in these organizations. Explicit within these organizations' missions and goals are messages of empowerment for women, including messages of self-sufficiency and independence. These messages of empowerment often coincide with neoliberal ideologies.

### **Unpacking the Terms**

***Neoliberalism*** refers to the global political-economic transformation, beginning in the 1970s, with the shift from Keynesian, state-regulated economic models to a deregulated, or free market economy (Clarke 2004; Everett and Charlton 2014; Harvey 1989; Harvey 2005; McMichael 2010; Mirowski 2009; Moghadam 2009; Peterson and Runyan 2014). This transformation has meant that governments have enacted policies that have contributed to the retreat of the welfare state, privatizing the provision of services that were once considered public goods (Ferguson 2006; Howell and Pearce 2001). In the countries of the global South, neoliberal policies coincided with International Finance Institutions (IFIs) granting conditional loans to developing countries on a basis that the country would agree to undergo severe economic restructuring, such as cuts in governmental spending on health care, education, and food subsidies as well as forcing developing countries to adopt trade liberalization policies (Babb 2005; Bergeron 2001; Everett and Charlton 2014 McMichael 2008; Mihevc 1995; Schaeffer 2009). In developed countries of the global North, neoliberal policies also implemented cuts in spending on public goods, such as education and health care. Financial and governmental

deregulation, monetarist policies, such as delinking the dollar from the gold standard, and destroying the power of labor unions were also some of the neoliberal policies and practices instituted in the global North.

Neoliberalism also has an ideological component, which provides legitimation, justification, and the construction of people's consent to neoliberal practices and policies by promoting ideologies of individualism and freedom, as well as personal responsibility and accountability. The conception of the neoliberal individual is grounded in the traditional European notion of liberal individualism (Harvey 2005; Mirowski 2009). Classical liberalism posits securing *personal* freedom through *individual* rights, including the right to enter into contracts with other individuals in the marketplace and the right to own property without interference from state. These individual rights form the basis of neoliberal thought as illustrated in Margaret Thatcher's slogan of "no society, only individual men and women" (Harvey 2005: 23). In this project, I adopt Harvey's use of neoliberalism because his conceptualization of neoliberalism and individualism lends itself to conversations about the depoliticizing effects of neoliberalism and its consequences for civil society as a sphere for collective forms of agency and empowerment. By delineating the history of neoliberal individualism, Harvey's discussion of the centrality of individual rights in neoliberal ideology contributes to an understanding of why global feminist theorists (Mies 1986, Mohanty 1991, 2003, Naples and Desai 2002) differentiate between individual forms of agency and collective forms of agency. Individual forms of agency, such as those promoted through self-improvement and self-help programs, tend to depoliticize women's choices as they

focus on an individual level of concerns and problems rather than connecting these problems, and possibly finding solutions, at a broader structural and institutional level. Global feminist theorists advocate empowerment programs that increase women's agency, meaning both empowering them to make choices and actualize these choices and connecting these choices to challenging broader structural inequalities. Only by moving from individual forms of agency to collective forms of agency, such as those produced in civil society, are women able to engender social change to improve their conditions.

The spread of neoliberal policies and ideologies across the developed and developing countries has coincided with the *global expansion of civil society*, a sphere of political organizations and associations not formally associated with the state. These organizations have proliferated with the spread of neoliberalism as they have adopted a service delivery role, substituting for a diminished welfare state. In the global South, in particular, IFIs, such as the World Bank and IMF, allocated a portion of development aid to establish a strong civil society with the idea that fostering civil society would aid economic development as political stability and a vibrant participatory democracy are the necessary conditions for capital investment to facilitate economic growth. These efforts all operate with a liberal democratic, or normative, conception of global civil society as a sphere of political activity that is inclusive, equally representative, cohesive, and morally good. Furthermore, the normative conception of global civil society views civil society as an autonomous political sphere, acting independent of the state. This conceptualization of civil society includes the notion that the relationship between



civil society and the state is vertical and dichotomous, where the state governs from above, in a top down manner, and civil society operates from below, functioning to either strengthen or oppose existing institutions of political power (Ferguson 2006).

However, given the continued failure of many economic development initiatives and the growing problem of poverty in the global South, some scholars have begun to recognize the limits of civil society in creating more democratic and equitable societies across the world (Amoore and Langley 2004; Howell and Pearce 2001; Mercer 2002). It is the recognition of these limits of civil society that has led to a growing body of literature that is written from the perspective of the critics of the liberal democratic conception, which overemphasizes the consensual, coherent, and moralistic nature of civil society. Instead, critics argue for a theory of civil society that recognizes the differences, tensions, and exclusionary tendencies within civil society (Amoore and Langley 2004; Bandy 2004; Howell and Pearce 2001). In order to engender more democratic and representative processes, some theorists advocate moving beyond frameworks of modernity that are based on principles such as order, rationality, centralization, hierarchy, binary, universality, and dichotomy (Escobar 2004; Escobar 2008; Mignolo 2005). These principles of modernity disregard and suppress non-European, indigenous, and locally based knowledge and experiences, contributing to anti-democratic and exclusionary tendencies within global civil society (Escobar 2004; Escobar 2008; Mignolo 2005). Moving beyond the modernity framework would eradicate patterns of power and privileged forms of knowledge, including those that organize the world according to a hierarchical categorization of threes (as illustrated in the use of the term First

World to refer to developed countries and Third World to refer to developing countries).

The alternative conception of civil society also envisions a broadening and deepening of democracy, deeming political those activities in multiple locations outside of the state, such as “in the community, in the family, and at the grassroots of political life” (Howell and Pearce 2001: 55). For critics, broadening and deepening democracy also functions to decentralize institutions of political power, dismantling inclusions and exclusions that existing power structures maintain (Flyvbjerg 1998; Fraser 2009). In my dissertation, I use the term **democratic** to refer to processes that are more equitable and representative of the everyday, lived realities of immigrant women. I also adopt the critics’ conception of civil society as it explains why identifying instances where unequal relations of power between NGOs and immigrant women exist may have the transformative potential to engender more equitable and open dialogue and therefore open up new spaces for marginalized groups to demonstrate agency. This transformative function of the alternative conception of global civil society contributes to explanations for why deconstructing simplistic, binary, and hierarchical relationships of NGOs’ staff and immigrant clientele exposes the complexities that contribute to immigrant women’s experiences of empowerment. It also explains immigrant women’s **agency** in terms of opening up space for more dynamic, complex roles of immigrant women within the process of resettlement, roles that can embrace being both receivers of assistance but also participants and leaders within NGOs and the community. Empowerment within this context is based on a notion of agency that is about

choice and decision-making. Women have more options available for the roles they embrace as they resettle (Kabeer 2005).

In addition to debates regarding the unified or conflictual nature of global civil society, scholars have also disagreed on the set of terms and concepts used to describe the multitude of various organizations, groups, and other constituents in global civil society. Among the groups included as part of global civil society are Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), which can include both larger, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs). Smaller, more locally situated Grassroots Organizations (GROs) are also often categorized as CSOs. In some instances, the use of the term non-governmental organizations refers to organizations that although primarily operate outside of the state, still interact with, and in some instances receive support from, larger international governmental organizations (IGOs), such as the United Nations, as well as international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank (Rai 2002). Given that GROs are considered a type of NGOs, I use the term ***Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)*** more broadly to refer to both organizations that are smaller, more locally based organizations founded and sustained through grassroots efforts as well as organizations whose activities and programs are created and maintained through partnerships with larger international governmental organizations (IGOs). Given that the United Nations channels funding to organizations in the Midwest for the resettlement of migrants, my dissertation research will include NGOs that although they operate locally, still maintain ties with and receive support from larger governmental organizations.

While patterns of cross border migration are a historical phenomena that first developed with colonial exploration and conquest, my dissertation focuses on recent patterns of global migration precipitated by the opening up of national borders to the flow of goods, services, capital, and people that have accompanied the creation of an interdependent global economy where production, labor, and capital are no longer subject to national constraints. These patterns of migration are primarily the movement of people from the global South to the global North. However, contemporary patterns of global migration also include the movement of people from developing countries in the global South to other better off developing countries in the global South as well as from developing countries in the global South to the oil rich countries of the Middle East (Schaeffer 2009).

In this dissertation, I focus on patterns of migration from the global South to the global North because it allows me to examine how hierarchical relations between the global South and the global North play out in a particular locality of the global North. While research in the alternative perspective of civil society has long been critical of the unequal relations of power between Northern-led NGOs and women living in developing countries, limited research has examined how power relations between Northern-led NGOs and women from developing countries play out in different localities, such as in the global North (Deeb-Sossa and Mendez 2008; Dolhinow 2005, 2010). My research further provides a more nuanced understanding of the many complex and varied ways that broader global, neoliberal forces shape the social relations imbedded in the everyday, lived practices of women from the global South.

## **Outline of the Dissertation**

**Chapter 2** focuses on how global feminisms frame my analysis of NGOs' contributions to immigrant women's empowerment. This theoretical framework emphasizes recognizing the diversity and difference in women's experiences of oppression and how women's experiences of oppression are situated in the intersection of not only race, class, gender, and sexuality but also geographical, cultural, and historical forces of domination. Global feminist theories posit this understanding of women's oppression in an effort to deconstruct unequal relations of power between women in the First and Third World that oftentimes results in homogenizing, essentialist constructions of the Third World Woman. I also focus on theoretical explanations of the notion of women's empowerment within the contemporary global age. This chapter also reviews the literature on the role of NGOs and civil society in individual and collective empowerment in a contemporary, neoliberal and global age. In particular, I address the importance of NGO accountability in the empowerment process. I then examine how recent research has framed issues related to NGOs' contributions to immigrant women's empowerment, the NGOs' construction of the notion of empowerment and their representation of immigrant women. In doing so, I discuss the research that analyzes how professionalization and bureaucratization and unequal power relations affect relationships between NGO staff members and immigrant women clientele. I then address the limited research on how NGOs have managed to overcome hierarchical and unequal relations of power between their organization and immigrant women. In addition, there are a limited number of studies that

examine the ways immigrant women's participation in NGOs has opened up more participatory and leadership roles within the organization, creating more equitable relationships between NGOs' staff members and immigrant women.

**Chapter 3** provides a detailed description of the methodology used in my dissertation. I explain the qualitative methods for collecting my data, including recruitment of my research participants. I also describe how I analyzed and coded my data. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the methodological limits of my study.

**Chapter 4** examines the notion of immigrant women's empowerment for NGOs in Kansas City. This examination will include an analysis of the impact of professionalization and bureaucratization on the activities and programs of these NGOs. In particular, I examine the innovative ways these NGOs have used to create a more equitable relationship with open dialogue between the NGOs and immigrant women. In addition, I analyze how these innovative methods of empowerment operate within the bureaucratized and hierarchical chain of command in the NGOs.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the perspective of the immigrant women. It examines how the immigrant women participants define empowerment. In addition, it analyzes how downward accountability within the NGOs facilitates the process of empowerment for immigrant women. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical significance of immigrant women's involvement in Kansas City based NGOs and the role these organizations play in immigrant women's empowerment. This chapter also addresses the unequal relations of power underlying the interactions between Kansas City based NGOs and immigrant women in the

activities and programs that promote immigrant women's empowerment.

Specifically, this chapter continues the discussion of how the notion of empowerment is constructed by asking whose perspective of empowerment is represented in these NGOs' programs and activities.

**Chapter 6**, the conclusion, summarizes my findings and discusses the implications for future research on immigrant women's empowerment and NGOs.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In this chapter, *first*, I will discuss how global feminisms guide my research on immigrant women's empowerment and the relationships between NGOs and their immigrant women clients. Although there are compatibilities between western feminism, particularly intersectionality feminists, and global feminisms, global feminisms explain the everyday experiences of women from developing countries as they account for differences in perspectives attributed to class, race, ethnicity, history, geography, and culture. In addition, global feminisms highlight the interconnectedness between women from developed and developing countries, particularly in activism that pursues more gender equitable conditions. This interconnectedness is pertinent to my research as it contributes to my analysis of the relationships between NGO staff members and immigrant women clients. *Second*, I will review the literature regarding NGOs and accountability in processes of empowerment. This section also addresses the literature on professionalization within NGOs and the issues NGOs encounter within a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure as well as the unequal relations of power between NGOs and their clientele.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory, in general, aims to explain why inequalities exist between the sexes and why males are often privileged over females as well as offering solutions to end this type of oppression. Most feminist theorists agree women's



oppression is rooted in the unequal relationship between men and women. Some theorists have attempted to explain the origin of this unequal relationship through theories of patriarchy that explain gender inequalities as originating in one particular social structure, such as family, women's labor, the productive and/or reproductive social spheres, violence against women or sexuality (Brownmiller 1976 ; Dworkin 1981; Firestone 1970; MacKinnon 1982; Rich 1980). Although, these theories have produced some significant insight into the origins and perpetuation of gender inequalities, they do not suffice to explain *all* women's experiences of oppression. Nor do they adequately serve as models useful for theorizing how to eliminate gender inequity and engender processes of empowerment. Not only do some fail to recognize the interconnected nature of social institutions, ideologies, and concrete social actions of individuals but they also group men and women into universal and homogenizing categories that are divorced from the social, cultural and historical context in which women experience oppression. Mohanty (2003) writes, "singular and monolithic categorizations of women in discourses of globalization circumscribe ideas about experience, agency, and struggle . . . There is also a divide between false, overstated images of victimized and empowered womanhood, and they negate each other" (248).

Furthermore, as global forces of capitalism draw women from a diverse range of societies, cultures, and geographic locations together in increasingly interconnected ways, *global feminist theorists* have argued that feminist theory should focus on empowering women in both Western and non-Western societies. Global feminisms, therefore, have developed theoretical explanations that better

contextualize, and offer solutions to gender inequity that are relevant to the ways women's experiences of oppression are socially and culturally situated. Global feminist theory also advocates activism that connects women in developed and developing societies rather than privileging the particular and the local in the pursuit of more gender equitable conditions. To privilege the particular would be to hinder the possibility of developing an effective politics of global feminisms.

Feminist scholarship, according to global feminisms, needs to place women's oppression in a global political and economic framework (Mies 1986; Mohanty 1991; Mohanty 2003). A global framework reveals the interconnectedness between the First and Third World, particularly in terms of the ways in which women in the developed countries (First World) are linked to women in developing countries (Third World) through systems of oppression and exploitation (Mies 1986, Mohanty 1991, Mohanty 2003). Global feminisms, in addition to patriarchy, focus particular attention on the political and economic systems of globalization, namely neoliberalism. The neoliberal economic and political processes exacerbate class, race, ethnicity, and gender inequalities and perpetuate women's oppression (Connell 2005; Mies 1993; Mohanty 2003; Naples and Desai 2002). In this way, global feminisms are consistent with *intersectionality feminism*, which argues that women's experiences under multiple forms of oppression are not a sum of different forms of oppression; rather, a women's identity is shaped by social location and where women are situated in the "cross cutting hierarchies" of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Baca Zinn and Dill 1996; Basu 1995; Mohanty 2003). Global feminist theorists argue that intersectionality theories are particularly useful in theorizing

differences, meaning situating women's experiences of oppression in the intersection of class, race, and sexuality. However, global feminisms also add that theorizing difference requires situating women's experiences of oppression in the intersection of geographical, cultural, and historical forces of domination as well. In this way, global feminisms theorize difference in a way that avoids being ahistorical, as it accounts for other historical systems of oppression, such as colonialism or imperialism.

Global feminisms also theorize how women actively resist the negative impacts that global economic restructuring has on their everyday lives (Mohanty 2003, Basu 1995). Some global feminist theorists write about linking feminism and activism through movements that bridge the gap between global and local. This is particularly evident in writings about various local women's movements that respond in different ways to global economic restructuring and its impact on their everyday lives (Basu 1995: McCann and Kim 2013). In this way, global feminisms also attempt to bridge the macro and micro levels of women's experiences in the process of empowerment as they resist the forces of oppression in their everyday lives. Mohanty (2003) writes about the role of a transnational feminist practice in global feminism, when she says, "a transnational feminist practice depends on building feminist solidarities across the division of place, identity, class, work, belief, and so on. In these very fragmented times it is both very difficult to build these alliances and also never more important to do so" (250). In my dissertation, I draw upon the global feminisms perspective to examine the role of NGOs in immigrant women's everyday experiences of empowerment as they resettle. Global feminisms,

with the linking of the local to the global, highlight how global economic and political processes affect the everyday lives of immigrant women and their experiences of empowerment as they resettle in the global North.

### **NGOs and Immigrant Women's Empowerment in the Global North: Issues of Empowerment, Accountability, Professionalization and Bureaucratization, and Relations of Power**

#### ***Women's Empowerment***

Within recent mainstream development discourse, ***empowerment*** refers to the end goal of development projects that produce participatory subjects at the grassroots level. This mainstream approach to development aims to listen more to the perspective and concerns of those in impoverished communities. During the 1990s, IFIs, such as the World Bank, and IGOs, most notably the UN, incorporated the participatory approach into the development discourse as they found state-led, top down development projects were not as effective in promoting economic development as they had hoped, and were not improving the lives of those in poverty in developing countries (Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002). However, a growing number of scholars believe that the participatory approach that is utilized by global development agencies romanticizes the power of the local without referencing the broader national and global political-economic processes and the complexities that produce the problems of poverty in developing countries (Kabeer 1994; Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002; Rowlands 1997). Adopting these critiques of the participatory approach to empowerment, I use the term empowerment to refer to a *process*, rather than an end goal, that simultaneously occurs at the local,

national, and global level and is as much collective as it is personal (Kabeer 1994; Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002; Rowlands 1997). This notion of empowerment recognizes the role of agency within unequal relations of power (Collins 2000; Foucault and Hurley 1990), but also recognizes that agency is constrained by larger institutional and structural forces (Marquand 1997; Phillips 1999). My research examines how NGOs create a more horizontal and participatory relationship with their immigrant women clients and how these more egalitarian relationships promote immigrant women's agency.

### ***Empowerment and Accountability***

Accountability is very important to the discussion of empowerment goals and projects for NGOs as it deals with relationships of power and representation. Accountability can be defined broadly as an organization's "willingness and ability to answer to relevant stakeholders" (Dempsey 2007: 313). This can include the processes by which an NGO is transparent in its responsibility to its missions and goals in a way that demonstrates its commitment to all parties involved and "actively responding to what it learns" (Slim 2002: 9). NGOs are often accountable to multiple stakeholders, including patrons, clients, and themselves (Kilby 2006, Ebrahim 2003b; Jordan and van Tuijl 2006). The first goal of an NGO, therefore, is to identify its stakeholders and prioritize them as primary or secondary (Dempsey 2007: 313). Oftentimes, because the needs of a NGOs' stakeholders are conflicting, a NGOs' accountability mechanisms also vary greatly across an organization. (Slim 2002: 9). Ebrahim (2003a), therefore, argues that accountability is first and foremost relational, meaning it is reflective of the relationships of power among

organizational actors. Demands and mechanisms for accountability are defined by these relationships and key challenges of accountability regard the “management of day-to-day organizational relationships” (Ebrahim 2003: 207). NGOs’ accountability mechanisms can range from formal to informal.

Recognizing that accountability involves relationships of power also allows for an understanding of the way power is distributed between NGOs and its constituents. NGO patron accountability, also referred to as upward accountability (Edwards and Hulme 1996b), describes NGOs’ relationships with donors, foundations, and governments and the NGOs’ activities of spending designated funds for specific purposes (Ebrahim 2003b, Najam 1996, Edwards Hulme 1996). Accountability of this type also coincides with what is referred to as external accountability, which describes how organizations are held externally to account for their actions, such as through legal obligations, explicit reporting, and disclosure requirements (Ebrahim 2003b). While external accountability may be necessary, Ebrahim (2003b) does argue that no amount of it will produce a sense of responsibility to its members. Ebrahim (2003b) does acknowledge that concerns about too much accountability among NGOs and its tendency to corrupt NGOs’ goals and missions are legitimate. However, he also contends that these concerns are more specifically about too much external and upward accountability. It is important, therefore, to mention other types of accountability that contribute to more empowering processes. Internal accountability refers to processes by which NGOs’ take internal responsibility for continuously self-evaluating their missions, goals, activities and performance. (Najam 1996, Ebrahim 2003b). In addition, NGOs

engage in forms of downward accountability when they hold themselves accountable to clients and groups who receive the NGOs' services.

Downward accountability is often thought to be an important part of the empowerment process as "it determines the distribution of power between NGOs and its constituency" (Kilby 2006: 953). Empowerment occurs in this context when the distribution of power allows for an opening up of the NGO to its members and constituents to scrutinize and to have some degree of control over the NGO (Kilby 2006). However, there are challenges to empowerment via "downward" accountability. It is hard for NGOs to respond to accountabilities when constituencies are diffused and varied. In addition, sometimes NGOs encounter a "moral hazard" when they present their own values as the values of their constituents (Zaldi 1999). They may also exert their power and influence to prescribe what they believe is empowering rather than representing what their constituents believe is empowering. Stakeholder participation does not necessarily guarantee authentic participation as they may have participation in project implementation, but limited authority with respect to decision-making. Najam (1996) has labeled this the "sham ritual" of participation. Finally, much of NGO "rhetoric" implies a NGO is an external agency that has a top down approach where the organization is creating an empowering environment. In these situations, the relationship between a NGO and its constituency is itself a manifestation of power as power is being imposed on those without power (Kilby 2006: 955). Kilby (2006) argues that NGOs lack more formal measures of their downward accountability and that more work needs to be done to "identify mechanisms for the development of

formal or semiformal” accountability measures to give NGO constituency “greater sense of ownership – and therefore – power – in the program while maintaining the flexibility of the NGO to expand their work to new communities” (960). Kilby is concerned with how NGOs can develop accountability mechanisms that allow them to be accountable to their constituents and true to their values and worldview.

Oftentimes this challenge of accountability is thought of in binary terms as an issue of either too much oversight or too much independence. However, as Ebrahim (2003b) argues, a more constructive way of dealing with the issue of accountability is to recognize “it as a more complex dynamic between external, internal, upward, and downward mechanisms that are differentiated across NGO types and are embedded in organizational relationships” (208). In this dissertation, I adopt this notion of accountability as my research examines how immigrant women’s empowerment is affected by NGOs’ accountability to both their members and their funders. More specifically, this integrated approach to accountability coincides with my examination of the innovative and creative ways that organizations are able to both appease donor requirements and work with their members and clients to enact empowerment programs that are non-hierarchical and more participatory.

### ***Professionalization and Bureaucratization within NGOs Serving Immigrant Women***

As the recent global financial crises have led to more and more instances of neoliberal economic restructuring, more and more funding for social service agencies has been cut. For example, agencies that are funded by the United Nations (UN) are now allowed to assist immigrants with resettlement only for sixty days.



Constraints such as this have led NGOs to compete more for other sources of financial support, for example, from foundations and other larger international NGOs. Consequently, the organizations feel pressure to follow the guidelines and requirements to show *outcomes* to their donors.

The competition among NGOs to secure funding to sustain their organizations' programs and activities has increasingly led to the professionalization of NGOs (Nagar and Raju 2003; Howell and Pearce 2001, Szczepanikova 2010). Professionalization in NGOs creates a bureaucratized and hierarchical structure, oftentimes with barriers of class and language between NGOs' staff and their clientele (Dolhinow 2010; Nagar and Raju 2003; Szczepanikova 2010). Professionalization in NGOs also raises questions of accountability. For example, with the highly competitive nature of fundraising, NGOs spend more time on follow up reports and yearly statements than focusing on providing services and empowerment of their clients (Dolhinow 2010). When examining NGOs' annual reports and documentation of the effectiveness of their programs and activities, it is important to consider the purpose of the reports. Is it for donors or is it for the purpose of internal evaluation and review of how the organization's programs are benefiting its clientele? (Dolhinow 2010; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Nagar and Raju 2003).

NGOs, however, have increasingly devised innovative ways to negotiate meeting both the demands from a heterogeneous clientele and from the donors. For example, Nagar and Raju (2003), in their work with the Population Council and various field-based NGOs in India, describe how they reduced the internal

hierarchies of their organization by democratizing the documentation process and making it a shared responsibility for both staff members and clients. They asked participants in the NGOs to explain their experiences in their own words. The staff members assisted with editing and revising of the document and after several collaborative revisions, the process had created a collective sense of ownership.

My research on immigrant women's NGOs in Kansas City contributes to this discussion of professionalization and bureaucracy of NGOs by examining to what extent they incorporate immigrant women's perspectives into the bureaucratic and professionalized structure of the organization by employing them for positions such as advocates in NGOs as well as encouraging them to be leaders in community-led organizations. In addition, I examine the immigrant women's experiences of empowerment through their involvement with these organizations. Specifically, I identify the ways the immigrant women participate and play an active role within the organization.

### ***Relations of power within NGOs serving Immigrant Women***

Recent scholarship finds that the majority of organizations, irrespective of the particular location in which they are based or the affiliations of the immigrant women with which they work, operate on assumptions that portray immigrant women as victimized, dependent, and passive recipients of the organization's services (Freedman 2007; Rainbird 2011; Szczepanikova 2009). NGOs often incorporate this victimized construction of immigrant women into the organizations' official discourse. This is not because the organization necessarily operates with negative attitudes towards the immigrant women, but because a

victimised construction of immigrant women justifies their work to policymakers and donors by emphasizing the immigrant's vulnerability and dependence (Rainbird 2011). Szczepanikova's (2009) research finds that the victimised construction of immigrant women is rooted in the unequal relations of power between NGOs and immigrants. She contends that this power differential disempowers immigrant women by forcing them into a position of dependency that excludes them from decision-making processes. Not only does this contradict the organizations' goals of working towards immigrant independence, but it also leads to a disjuncture between the organizations' goals for empowerment of their clients and the activities they use to achieve these goals (Dohlinow 2005). Furthermore, NGOs' portrayal of immigrant women as victimised and dependent causes incompatibility of the NGOs' notion of empowerment with immigrant women's notion of empowerment that is based on their own resettlement goals and experiences (Szczepanikova 2009; Tomlinson and Egan 2002).

Despite various criticisms of the activities of the NGOs and their representation of immigrant women, scholars remain optimistic about the long term effects of the empowerment work in which both NGOs and immigrant women participate. This optimism is based on the mobilizing and consciousness raising effects that develop out of NGOs' encouragement of immigrant women's active involvement in decision-making processes (Helms 2003; Rainbird 2011). Scholars that remain optimistic about the long-term effects of NGOs' work with immigrant women argue that over time this work leads immigrant women to adopt more active and independent roles in the immigrant community. For example, NGOs encourage

immigrant women to act as leaders in immigrant-led community organizations and to be active participants in providing services to immigrants new to the community (Andrew and Lukajo 2005; Rainbird 2011; Tomlinson and Egan 2002).

Furthermore, most research has focused on relations of power between the state and individuals and the state and NGOs (Dolhinow 2005, 2010, Deeb Sossa and Bickham-Mendez 2008), but little attention has been directed towards *relations of power between NGOs and individual clients*.

Most of the studies on NGOs and immigrant women's empowerment emphasize the negative aspects of bureaucracy and professionalization for the organization. These studies emphasize how the hierarchical structure of the organization contributes to unequal relations of power between the NGOs staff and the immigrant women clientele. Furthermore, most research discusses how these imbalances in power also accompany organizations' victimized and disempowered constructions of immigrant women. These victimized constructions limit the possibilities for immigrant women's agency as it prevents them from adopting more participatory and leadership based roles in their community.

My research on Kansas City based NGOs demonstrates that not all organizations have a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure that contributes to unequal relations of power between the staff and clients. Rather, my data demonstrates that despite a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure, organizations are finding innovative and creative ways to close the hierarchical gap between their staff members and the immigrant women clientele and incorporate notions of empowerment that are more grounded in and representative of the everyday lived

realities and experiences of immigrant women. In addition, I ask how these innovative methods have changed the structure of the organizations, making it more horizontal and participatory, and how this has impacted roles of immigrant women within the organization, roles that encourage women to both receive assistance and participate as leaders in the organizations' programs and activities. By examining how the relationship between the staff members and the clientele is more equitable, my research also raises broader questions about how the interaction between NGOs' staff members and their clientele leads to immigrant women's experiences of agency and empowerment. In this context, immigrant women's participation in the program is framed by their own experiences and choices of what they view as important to improving their lives as they resettle.

### CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

My dissertation research explores issues related to immigrant women and their empowerment in the *New Roots for Refugees* organization affiliated with the Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas City, the *Keeler Women's Center* and the *Mattie Rhodes Center*. In examining these three organizations' roles in assisting immigrant women with the process of empowerment, *first*, I analyzed the content of the organizations' materials, such as brochures, website content, pamphlets, and other promotional materials, to examine how the organizations construct their notion of empowerment and how they contribute to immigrant women's empowerment and agency. I specifically focused on the nature and the types of programs, workshops, activities, and services that these NGOs provide for immigrant women.

*Second*, I used open ended face-to-face interviews and discussions with both staff members and immigrant women within the NGOs to examine how organizations' relationships with immigrant women have changed over time and how these changes may have reduced hierarchical and binary divisions between the NGO staff and immigrant women clientele. Interviews with the NGOs' staff members allowed them to explain how they perceive their organization's objectives contributing to the process of immigrant women's empowerment. In addition, these interviews allowed me to examine how they construct their notion of empowerment and specifically, what this notion of empowerment entails for immigrant women's agency. These interviews also allowed staff members to discuss any of the

strategies that they have adopted in order to promote open dialogue and an equitable, more participatory relationship with the immigrant women in the activities and programs of their organization. Interviews with immigrant women allowed me to examine their experiences of empowerment due to their involvement with the organization. In particular, I analyzed the ways they feel they have an active and participatory role within the organization, and are vital to the functioning of the organization (see Interview Questions – Appendix A).

### **Research Sample**

I conducted forty open ended face-to-face interviews, of about two hours each, with directors, staff members, volunteers, and participants in the NGOs. The majority of the interviews were conducted with one interviewee, although a few of the interviews did consist of two or more interviewees. Respondents were selected through a snowball sample of members, volunteers, and participants in the organization. Before conducting these interviews, I obtained approval from the Human Subjects Advisory Committee. According to their protocol, informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. In order to ensure anonymity of the participants, names are not reported with their responses in this study.

All interviews took place in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri. Interviews with staff members of the organizations were held primarily at the offices of the organizations, although one took place at the staff member's home. Interviews with participants took place primarily at the interviewee's house with a few taking place at the organization. During all of the interviews with Burmese and

Karen immigrant participants, a Karen or Burmese interpreter was present during the interview to translate for me. The Karen translator, in particular, further helped me gain entrée into the Karen community. As the interviews progressed, we built a mutually beneficial relationship. She was taking courses at the local community college and on occasion would ask me to help her with some of her coursework. As I developed a rapport with her, she was very willing to help me set up interviews with the participants and ensure that the participants be present for the interview. Both she and her mother were very well-connected and trusted members of the Karen community. Having her as a translator helped to break cultural barriers between interviewer and interviewee and allowed for the participants to trust talking with me more openly and candidly. However, most Latina women spoke adequate English so that an interpreter was not needed. Although in a few instances their teenage children did interpret when needed during the interview. In order to open the dialogue, I usually asked immigrant participants questions about their children who were oftentimes present during the interview. I would then tell them about my six-month-old son and would show them a picture. Some of the participants first met me when I was pregnant and they would ask about my baby. This was also a natural segue way into conversation and a helpful way to start the dialogue between the interviewee and myself.

My sample of staff member interviewees was recruited initially through email communication; whereas, my sample of immigrant women interviewees was recruited during workshops, organizational events, and through recommendations from staff members and other immigrant participants at the conclusion of the



interviews. About half of the participants came to the organizations on their own accord, hearing about the organization's activities from either a flier or from word of mouth from other immigrants. The other half of the participants found out about the organization through a social worker's suggestions. This was particularly true for immigrant women involved in New Roots for Refugees as these participants were having trouble finding employment. Their involvement in New Roots offered the possibility of obtaining supplemental income from selling their produce at local farmers' markets.

I conducted my interviews with mostly female staff members, although I did interview one male staff member. Eleven of the staff members were between the ages of 22 and 35. Three interviewees were between the ages of 36 and 54 and four were between the ages of 54 and 75. All the staff members held college degrees. Six of those staff members had a Master's Degree and one had a Doctorate.

My interviews with immigrant participants were primarily with women. However, in some instances, husbands wanted to sit in and answer my questions during the interview process. In total, I interviewed eighteen women and four men (see Profile of Interviewees – Appendix B). Ten of the immigrant participants were employed full time and twelve were either unemployed or held part-time, seasonal jobs. When disclosed, their occupations varied greatly. Four of the participants worked cleaning offices and homes. One participant worked as an Administrative Assistant, two worked in a laundromat, two worked in a soap-making factory, and one worked in a meat packing plant. All the participants I interviewed were between the ages of 22 and 54 with seven between the ages of 22 and 36 and fifteen

between the ages of 36 and 54. Their educational level, when disclosed, varied too with one of the participants having some college education and three holding a college degree. Of the remaining participants, eight had attended high school and seven had attended primary school.

### **Data Collection**

My initial point of contact with these organizations was through the directors. For example, I had a personal contact, through a mutual friend, with the director of New Roots for Refugees. First, we set up a time to meet and discuss the mission, goals, and basic operations of the organization. Then, I attended the farmer training workshops for immigrant participants in the New Roots for Refugees program. These workshops were two hours in length and held weekly for a period of four months at the Juniper Training Gardens in Kansas City, Kansas. Topics covered in the workshops included practical farming instruction, such as pest control and watering methods. Workshops also covered broader entrepreneurial skills, such as various methods for selling produce, marketing techniques to sell vegetables at farmers markets, and how to budget and save money for future investment in the farming enterprise. Approximately five different immigrant groups attended the workshops, including Burmese, Karen, Karenni, Nepalese, and Somalis. New Roots for Refugees arranged to have a translator for each immigrant group as the workshops were held in English and then translated into various languages.

The immigrant participants were friendly to me from the very start of the first few meetings and always greeted me warmly, despite the language barrier. This made approaching them for interviews easier, especially after I had attended the four months of farmer training workshops from January to April in 2013. Once the workshops had concluded, I proceeded with attending the farmer's markets where the immigrant participants were selling their produce. When I approached the women farmers, they recognized me from the workshops and were happy to see me and agreed to speak with me upon my request for an interview.

In addition, while attending workshops and meeting with the staff members at New Roots for Refugees, I also analyzed events at the Keeler Women's Center. After first meeting with the director of the center, I started attending the center's Latina Women's Group that meets every week or two and discusses a variety of topics, including stress management, healthy relationships, natural remedies and vitamins for healthy living, and memories honoring their mothers. Approximately eight women attend the women's group, most of which are immigrants from various cities in Mexico. The participants, similar to New Roots for Refugees, were warm and friendly to me despite the language barrier. Although the meetings were primarily conducted in Spanish, the two organizers of the meetings helped translate the events and discussions for me. After attending their meetings from December 2012 to April 2013, I approached the two organizers for their help in recruiting the women for interviews. They arranged a group interview for me during one of their meetings and they agreed to translate for me. Following the group interview, I

arranged to interview specifically the two organizers of the Latina Women's group as well as the director and assistant directors of the Keeler Women's Center.

## **Data Analysis**

At the conclusion of each workshop I attended, I typed up extensive field notes detailing what was covered in the workshop, the number of participants that attended, and interactions between the participants and the staff members. These notes provided context for my interviews and helped me further refine my interview questions for both participants and staff members. I also typed up notes following each interview regarding important points to follow up on in any subsequent interviews with that particular interviewee and important notes to help me further refine my questions as I conducted more interviews.

Once my data collection was completed, my first step in analyzing the data was to convert it into a usable form. To do this, I transcribed all the interviews into typed documents. At this point, I divided my data into two groups of interviewees: staff and participants. As part of my analysis, I used a three-step process of coding the data into emerging themes and subthemes. I completed this process twice: once for the participants and once for the staff.

I began the data analysis by an in-depth reading and note-taking of the transcribed interviews to code for the main emerging themes from the interviewees responses. During this first phase of coding the data, I was looking for themes related to empowerment, power relations between staff and clients, and bureaucracy and professionalization within the organization. However, I was very

open to letting my data speak for itself, allowing additional themes to emerge so that the data would not be forced into the preconceived categories informed by my research question.

For the next step in my analysis, I focused on further categorization of the themes that had emerged during the first phase of coding the data. To do this, I considered whether the themes could be further classified into subthemes or if certain themes could be clustered together. It was during this phase of coding that I also narrowed down some of the themes and categories that I had noted during my initial phase of coding the data.

During my third, and final, phase of coding the data, I used the themes that I had refined during my first two readings of the data to select examples from the data that best illustrated these refined concepts. During this final coding of the data, I also ensured that the selected narratives provided support for the analytical comparisons and categorizations of the themes. During all three coding processes, I employed my theoretical framework of global feminisms to further clarify connections between the themes that emerged from my data.

### **Methodological Limits of the Study**

Conducting interviews with participants that do not speak English poses several issues in the interviewing process. For my study, I had limited access to Burmese and Karen translators. However, I was able to find an interpreter for Burmese and an interpreter for Karen speakers. The first few times I interviewed participants using the interpreter were difficult as I had not spent adequate time

with the interpreter in order to discuss my questions and the aim of my research. This was problematic as the interpreter was unsure of some of the wording in my questions and had to stop during the interview for further clarification on some of my questions. Furthermore, the interpreter, during the first couple of interviews, did not provide direct translation of the participants' answers, but rather very condensed and summarized versions of what the participant said. As I conducted more interviews, the interpreters worked with me to understand my questions and what I was trying to convey to the participants and consequently, the interviews proceeded more smoothly.

The language barrier also proved to be problematic as it made it difficult to elaborate on some of the more complex ideas in my questions. In addition, many of the participants focused on farming techniques to cultivate their crops and therefore I often received responses very specific to the growing of their fruits and vegetables. I quickly learned that in order to get the participants to elaborate more, I would need to utilize many follow up questions despite the repetitiveness of asking for more clarification.

Certain cultural differences also affected the interviewing process and the responses I received. I noticed that the participants tended to be more humble regarding their accomplishments and participation in the program. Therefore, I also had to ask the same question in several different ways in order to get the participants to be more open about their achievements and their participatory role in the organization.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION WITHIN BUREAUCRACY: EMPOWERMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE NGOS**

In this chapter, *first*, I examine the notions of empowerment for the NGOs in Kansas City. *Second*, I analyze the challenges these NGOs encounter as they implement programs and activities for immigrant women. In addition, I describe the innovative and creative ways these NGOs counter these challenges. *Third*, I discuss additional methods the organizations utilize to ensure that they operate with more downward accountability to their participants.

Note: Some of the interviews include incomplete sentences or other grammatical issues. However, I have chosen to cite quotations verbatim and, therefore, I have not used the term “sic.”

#### **NGOs and Notions of Empowerment**

Three general themes of empowerment, as well as related subthemes, emerged during analysis of the data from the perspectives of the NGOs' staff members. All the notions of empowerment contained ideas of community engagement, emotional support, and increasing women's self-worth and confidence. *First*, the staff of the NGOs defined empowerment for the immigrant women as the adoption of more participatory and engaging roles in the immigrant community. For the staff members, this notion of empowerment functioned as a source of emotional support for the immigrant women as they developed friendships with other immigrant women. A more participatory and engaging role in the community also encouraged the immigrant women to adopt leadership roles within their own

community. *Second*, the staff of the NGOs also believed that their organization empowered women through increasing the immigrant women's visibility within the broader American community. This increased visibility not only alleviated negative attitudes towards immigrants but also made the immigrant women feel more valued and increased their perceptions of self-worth as they recognized that they bring skills to the community as well as diversity, enriching the American experience. *Third*, all three organizations defined empowerment for the immigrant women as an increase in their quality of life. For the staff of these NGOs, quality of life meant that the women were better able to meet their basic needs through improved food access and safer neighborhoods. Improvements in quality of life, according to the staff, also meant that the immigrant women would have a better sense of purpose in their lives and a more enjoyable day to day experience similar to the daily life in their home countries.

***First***, NGO staff members defined empowerment for the immigrant women as the ***adoption of more participatory and engaging roles in the immigrant women's community***. On a very basic level, this would mean they would develop friendships with other immigrants in their community. One staff member substantiated this when she spoke of how her program facilitated community bonds with other immigrants.

*I would probably be inclined to stay at home and you know hang out with my kids if I had them and probably not go out a whole lot. My inclination is to say that this probably not only gets people out of the house, but strengthens community bonds because people are buying and selling from each other and getting to know people in the farmers' markets as well as getting to know the other farmers in the program. So, I think it's beneficial in a lot of ways.*



NGOs' programs and activities are valuable as they provide the women with a space to share their experiences and offer support to one another. Some staff members described how regular meetings fostered valuable relationships among the women.

*That's one of the things that surprised us. That more than the information we were giving them, what was drawing them was sharing with each other. They weren't friendly when they started, and they have become friends, and you can see the relationships developing.*

Oftentimes, a familial feeling existed among the immigrant women participants.

Women welcomed the space to share with one another and felt that the connections they developed enriched their lives greatly. One staff member described how the women started out very timid and quiet in the women's group that covered health related issues. Over time, as the group progressed, women began to share more of their experiences and stories. One staff member explained the familial relations that developed over time in the women's group.

*Once they were comfortable within the group, I mean, you see how easily they share information with you and they share of themselves. They bring gifts; they bring food. They want to be like a family kind of an event.*

Staff members spent a lot of time listening to the participants share their stories and difficulties. Many of the staff identified this as part of their duties in helping participants. Giving the women a space to open up and share their experiences was very important to the staff. One staff member summarized her perception of the immigrant women in her organization when she spoke of what she had learned from them

*You know, they are wonderfully kind and just. They all are beautiful, and you learn that it doesn't matter what language you speak, we all have the same needs - the need to share, all those human things.*

The staff members clarified why offering the women a place to meet and share with one another was an important part of their experience as an immigrant woman. In instances where women's legal status is questionable, women are not only isolated, but live in fear of being deported, which causes them to hesitate to reach out to other people they don't know in their own immigrant community.

*The same trepidation, the same misgivings they have about venturing out of their community, they have amongst themselves. I think, you know, the fear in general of being here perhaps in not the best circumstance, you know, follows them in whatever they do. So it's not as easy to just reach out to some other Latin woman you see on the street and say, "Hi." I think there is this fear that, "Who is she?" "Are they going to report me?" It's very hard to establish relationships even though they are all Latin and they may all be in the same situation.*

Not only did these women have a safe place to develop supportive relationship but also staff members felt that the women's group encouraged them to feel comfortable having a voice and expressing their own opinions both with each other and with their family members. One Latina staff member explained how important this was given the way gender roles operated within the immigrant women's culture.

*Our culture is very, I don't know how to translate that into English, it's a machismo culture, so it's very male-dominated. Even though you see women here who seem very strong and have an opinion, when they are home it's typically the man who runs the family, and they are very smart and they know exactly how that works and how to work around it. But still, it's a culture that is dominated so much by men that they're not always given the opportunity to express themselves. So, I think with education comes that peace where you can say, "I think I need to be part of this discussion or this decision." Whereas, women who may not have a formal education or were not exposed to other women who have been able to express themselves, that they feel that finally someone else has been able to surpass that and gets her point across.*

Another Latina staff member also discussed how the women used the knowledge they learned in the women's group to reach out to others and share information with members of their family and their community.

*For example, when we talk about vitamins and health, they reach out to others when they learn what the vitamins do to their bodies and what can prevent diseases with that. They reach out to others. They learn here and they find out and they talk to their community and to their families.*

In some instances, NGO staff felt that their activities not only helped women express themselves, but encouraged the women to adopt more leadership roles within their own community, becoming a source of knowledge and information for other women and participants in the organization and becoming a well-respected, well-known member of their community. In these instances, the organizations operate with a notion of empowerment that includes encouraging the women to develop leadership skills and adopt roles as leaders in their community. One staff member spoke of how the organization's activities have helped one woman to cultivate her leadership skills.

*[The director] wanted to have at least one Karenni farmer in the program, so she went to the church leaders and they nominated [this Karenni woman] as she would be good for this program. She was pretty shy at first, but she has definitely come into her own. She communicates so well, even with others who speak Burmese but aren't Karenni. She is always starting conversations and you can tell that they look to her for advice on the farm.*

In another organization, the staff held similar goals of empowerment through leadership roles for their participants, but were still in the process of figuring out how their organization could encourage the women to utilize their leadership skills. For example, one staff member spoke of her hope that the immigrant women residents in the historic Northeast Kansas City neighborhoods would become more

involved and have more of a voice in their neighborhood safety and beautification projects.

*They're not [involved]. I've seen at the Neighborhood Association meetings they are not very involved and I'm not exactly sure why, but I can speculate for different reasons why. And that's why we wanted to make sure we were also capturing a lot of the Hispanic voice just because the neighborhood is predominantly Hispanic. We want to make sure we are collecting data that is also with the majority are Hispanic as well. Because that is one thing and the Neighborhood Association knows it. They also realize that is one of their challenges is just trying to get more of the Spanish speaking population to attend the Neighborhood Association meeting. I think it will be a challenge. I think it's a challenge for many Neighborhood Associations. They do see that as one of their shortcomings in that they don't get the usual feedback from the immigrant population. I think a lot of them just don't know about the system, like the different layers of government, and local government, neighborhood government. I mean, I think there is just so much to know.*

The staff member continued with an explanation for why she thought the immigrant women did not have as much of a voice within their local neighborhood associations.

*I'm not exactly sure how educated they are. I get the feeling that they are not very, which is one of the reasons why their voice is probably – put it this way, the people that I have had interested in taking leadership roles in the liter campaign are English speaking people who already have leadership roles either at work or you know, so I think they are kind of used to it. They know the procedure. They know the protocol for it. I don't think immigrant women feel, but I also don't think they've been asked. I don't think that they've been asked, do you want to? One of the reasons why I stopped doing interviews at 13, was that, I mean, people when you ask them things, they will just continue. I was having interviews for 2 hours with some people. I was like, you know, what do you think? There is no right or wrong answer, I just want to hear from you, and would just, well, let me tell you. So I think they just probably haven't been asked at the right time, you know, in the right setting for their feedback and input, which hopefully with the list of people who said they'd be interested and staying in touch with us, getting involved. We are keeping that as our data bank of people to reach out to who want to get involved.*

In this organization, staff members continued to work to cultivate and encourage leadership in the Latina members of that community. One staff member spoke of

how they took it upon themselves to ensure that the women were participating in the Neighborhood Association meetings.

*As a matter of fact, last week I met one of the residents. I asked her - they're all Spanish speaking - how long have you been here? I've been here for 20 years. I'm like, oh, you know about the association? She said, yeah, I used to go, but there was only 2 or 3 of us and I don't feel comfortable going and not being felt that I'm been heard. I was like, okay, well, we're going to change that. If it's okay with you, I can come pick you up. You see, that's what it takes, and I can be there. Cause we were the minority and the majority was older Caucasian or whatever. So, my sister lives down the street. She's been here for a while too. She said, we want to get involved but we just don't feel included. So there is language and then they were beginning to feel like, number-wise, there were less than. Then, say okay, well, let's change that.*

**Second**, the NGOs in this study described empowerment as **increasing the visibility of immigrant women in the broader American community**. For the organizations, this is empowering to the immigrant women because it functions to combat feelings of isolation the immigrant women often experience. In addition, it helps with assimilation, particularly at a time when misperceptions about immigrants contribute to anti-immigrant sentiments. One staff member described how the program helped change the attitudes of the broader American community.

*And I see a lot of women at those farmers' markets. The message I want to send to them, even though they're not the primary client we're working with. Our program is the ambassador of the refugee program, bringing out the situation that people are facing and hoping to really expand the understanding and the support of what people are going through. So I interact with a lot of people that say things like, "well I don't work with illegals." They just don't understand the refugee situation at all, or the legality of it. There's a lot of concerns, a lot of questions. I feel like we have the ability to help answer those questions, and then more importantly help to build friendships. And I feel like that's a really big thing, especially in the United States right now with just all the talk of immigration. There's not a lot of places where I feel people really get to connect. And that's another place. I feel like food is a really equal playing field to do that on. It just allows us to talk really openly with people.*

The staff member then followed that up with how the other farmers' attitudes were changing as they interacted more with the immigrant women at the markets.

*I see a lot of customers. I also see a lot of farmers' attitudes changing. I feel like that's really interesting to me. A lot of other farmers who sell at farmers' markets come from rural places. Maybe they would never interact with someone from another country or they would never interact with someone who's a refugee. And so we're able to bridge that a little bit. So I do see people's attitudes changing. I see people understanding. I see people being supportive and really loving our farmers. So people miss our farmers when they're not there. They ask about them. They know the names of their kids.*

Staff at a different organization shared the same concerns regarding visibility of immigrants and hoped the organization's efforts would alleviate some of the negative attitudes towards immigrants. Although the organization still grappled with this issue, it was very much at the forefront of the staff's minds and was acknowledged as an obstacle to address in immigrant women's empowerment.

*I feel like this is what's going on. This is your working class here. I think a lot of people see the same. I've heard through my interactions with different residents, and in the Neighborhood Associations, and at the schools, that a lot of finger gets pointed towards certain groups. A lot of times I've heard, "well you know they're immigrants, they don't know this or whatever and they are to blame for XYZ." And I've heard that, not from everyone, but I hear it. What's interesting is that when I talk to a lot of these immigrant families, they have the same concerns that a non-immigrant would have as well. And I want to make sure that the Neighborhood Association understands that, you know, there is no dividing lines here across these concerns. You know, they also see it. They also see the crime. They see the litter. They see the bad sidewalks as a problem. You know, we also see it as well. So you actually have allies in them with that. Now they may not know what they're supposed to do about it or they may not know that they are responsible for their sidewalk. They may think that's the city property. I think it's more of maybe they don't have this knowledge, but they certainly have the concern there, which means we can move forward with leadership.*

This increased visibility of immigrant women and changes in attitude on the part of the broader American community also has the effect of making the

immigrant women feel more valued and increases their perceptions of self-worth.

One staff member described this effect

*I mean, one thing that sort of struck me, talking to a staff member, was how this program can be a showcase for the refugee population. Like a lot of times maybe they are pushed aside or forgotten and this program, I mean, when people hear about it they just love it. They think it's a great thing. And people are seen at the farmer's market. People see them, so they have more visibility. So, yeah, they definitely have visibility in areas where they wouldn't necessarily otherwise go. And I think that's very important within the program. Just, I think that sends a message of being important, having something to say.*

Other staff members in this NGO also expressed the way that the organization's market activities promoted a sense of value and self-worth for the immigrant women.

*I think the main goal is to provide people a chance to do something that is familiar to them. It's healthy for them. It offers a really tangible way to give back to the community in a way that's different from most other work options that they have when they first arrive. A lot of the refugee clients that we work with here tend to go straight into factory work and they may do that for the rest of their lives. This is an option for them to be visible in the community, and interact with Americans, and become comfortable with their environment, and feel like they have something to give that values them as an individual.*

When asked what messages the staff hoped their organization communicated to immigrant women, many of the staff members spoke of the value that the immigrant women add to the broader American community and hoped that the immigrant women recognized that they are valued. For example, with immigrant women farmers, staff recognized that the agricultural skills that the women possessed could be important to their ability to provide for their family. One staff member discussed this when she said

*I think a message that the program sends is that people are capable. You know – I heard this from other staff members as well – you have, you're valuable, you have a valuable skill, and you know this. This is something that you grew up doing, something that you really understand better than even a lot of*

*Americans, and so you have this valuable skill and here we're going to help you know how to do it within our cultural context.*

Many of the staff members I spoke with hoped that promoting messages of value and self-worth would mean that the participants would recognize their capability and competency.

*So that is a message of, you know, you're an important person. You're valuable. You're competent. You have an important skill. Where I feel like for a lot of people coming over as a refugee, they may not have any other way of hearing that.*

Some staff spoke of value on a broader level, referring to the immigrant women's culture and the diversity it brings to the local community. One staff member acknowledged that these women's contributions to the community would counter the stereotype of the immigrant women as a passive recipient of social services. The staff members hoped that the immigrant women participants would feel that they had something to give back to the community, their culture, so the relationship would not be one of a disempowered recipient.

*I really enjoyed the idea that people can come and feel appreciated for who they are, exactly as they are, regardless of any sort of status, any sort of economic, any sort of whatever. And so I would hope that that is the message that they give, that they are here and celebrated and embraced, versus – sometimes it's just a tricky line. Social services, people are feeling like getting handouts. It's not even like feeling sorry for. We're really just embracing people for who they are. I think that that's one of the reasons I love that we have the art center, because it really celebrates the culture in a great way versus just like saying, "oh, we're here to help." No, let's bring this wonderful community and wonderful culture and all these customs and things, and let's share them with other people because we think it's something that's worth sharing, versus let's talk about this over here and fix it. So that's one of the things I like about our organization and how it embraces the community events.*

**Third**, all three organizations also discussed empowerment in terms of an **increase in the quality of life for the immigrant women**. Quality of life, for some



of the organizations' staff members meant improvements in meeting the women's basic needs for themselves and their family, such as ensuring better food access and safer neighborhoods and communities that they live in.

*I would say to the women in our program, I want them to feel like they have control over their lives and that they can change their life. That they have the ability to grow and do what they want. I feel like so many people, when they come to the United States, they feel totally powerless. So I want to empower folks to feel like they have control over their food, which is a really big thing, especially for folks from these cultures. That's a really big part of their experience - what they're used to doing. You know, food, when you eat it, comforts you? It's good food. Or if your mom cooks it. There's just something about food that makes people feel safe and secure. So I want people to have determination over their food. I want women to feel like they have control over that.*

Another staff member in a different organization explained how important safe living environments were to empowering women through improving their quality of life.

*Public safety is an issue - people not feeling safe, people feeling like there's a lot of gangs, or I hear a lot of gun shots. In terms of things related to health, which we didn't really think about, stray animals are an issue in the area. There is a tremendous amount of stray dogs running around. We have a lot of kids that walk to school in the northeast, so parents fear for their kids having to walk to school if you've got a pack of dogs coming down the street. We had one lady telling us about [how] she has to walk to the grocery store because she doesn't have a car. And she carries around a stick to ward off dogs. So she can only buy a certain amount of groceries to even get back to her house because she has to leave one hand free. And we just hear these things over and over again. Litter and trash is another huge problem, which I would totally agree, because when you drive around the neighborhood, you just think, "oh my gosh, there's just trash everywhere." So these are the kinds of things that the neighborhood's like, "we want a place that looks nice. Why is there just trash everywhere all the time?" So it's all of these things that keep popping up. Sidewalks that either don't exist, or they're broken up and nobody ever fixes them, poor lighting, which again plays into the safety issue. Definitely if it's not well lit, if I don't have good sidewalks, I can't even walk around. I don't feel safe, there's stray dogs - all of these factors that all kind of intertwine. Those are some of the things that we've been hearing [from] people.*

The staff member continued to express how listening to the ways these women's day-to-day life was affected by lack of safety in their neighborhoods, made her more conscious of listening to what the participants really needed to thrive in their everyday life.

*For me personally, it is kind of about listening to individuals. Sort of their story, what is it that is a struggle for you, or a concern for you? And trying to respond to that as best we can. We're really meeting folks where they're at and not putting blame or fault on anybody or any one thing, because our lives are affected by so many factors that when something positive isn't going for your life, you kind of shut down and you don't see the other possibilities that can be beyond that. So I think kind of working with individuals to realize that there is that light at the end of the tunnel, or there is a possibility of things getting better, or you have the potential to do this. Sometimes we as individuals don't see that. We need folks in our lives to nudge us along. I understand that you don't speak English now, but we can get there. Let's get you there. That's your goal. Let's help you get there. That's why I really like our mission, because it is about helping people to thrive, whatever that means to you.*

On a broader level, the staff members viewed an improvement in quality of life as the women having more a sense of purpose in their life and a more enjoyable day to day experience that is similar to their daily life in their home countries.

*I think that the community garden addition is really important because it just enables us to serve so many more people and give so many more people land access, but it definitely improves the quality of life for people to be able to spend time outside and work with their hands doing something that they've grown up doing. I mean, I didn't necessarily grow up gardening, but I know how much better it makes me feel to be outside doing things. So, I can only imagine if that was your lifestyle before.*

Another staff member spoke of how the program's activities improved the immigrant women's quality of life because it allowed the women to engage in activities that were familiar and comforting to them.

*I mean everyone in the program, They're in it because they love agriculture. They grew up farming, their parents farmed. Not everybody in that situation loves farming, but the people who are joining this program love it. So that's where that quality of life aspect comes in. They're at the farm. They feel good.*

*They love what they're doing. They enjoy being outside. They enjoy being with the other people. They enjoy growing vegetables. That's huge for those farmers. It does increase quality of life.*

Staff members in all three organizations expressed that rapport and trust with the community is essential to implementing immigrant women's empowerment programs. All the organizations demonstrated that they have support and trust of the community that they serve. This is evidenced by the way participants find out about the organizations' programs and activities. Most of the time it is done through the word of mouth as participants have had success and received a lot of help from the organizations.

*But I think the fact that word of mouth is how it spreads. I imagine their friends in the community are encouraging them to be like, "you should really be involved in this." So, I honestly think just the women in the family have more time on their hands to commit to it.*

One staff member described how their organization recruited more participants than their program could support.

*Usually we have way more interest than availability. So we recruit people through the farmers themselves. Maybe they have a friend that's interested. That's probably the biggest way that we get folks. We also put up posters at Catholic Charities so all the people who come for appointments are aware of the program. We talk to the job developers and case managers that work with clients. So usually through all of those means, we'd get a good pool of people. We have an initial meeting where we give out lots of information about the program. Then folks can decide if they're interested. If they are, then they call us and schedule an interview.*

## **Innovation and Creativity to Counter Organizational Challenges**

Community engagement, increased visibility, and improvements in quality of life are all part of the NGOs' philosophy of empowerment. However, similar to most organizations, the NGOs in this study encountered challenges as they implemented

the programs and activities for the immigrant women. Despite these challenges, the staff members of the NGOs have come up with innovative and creative ways to effectively serve the immigrant women according to the needs identified by the women.

One challenge for the organizations in this study was funding. All three organizations identified a lack of funding or resources as a constant struggle and issue. As one staff member described, lack of funding not only affected the financial operation of the organization, but also the ability to maintain a staff of quality employees.

*Definitely one of the obstacles that is ongoing stress is finding more funding. We are always short of funding. I don't so much have to experience it first hand, but cuts have to be made and there's just uncertainty. It's hard to keep good people working when there is uncertainty about whether or not they're able to stay on. Individually, in both of our organizations there has definitely been high turn over rates for just people coming and going, especially in the last year. There's been a lot of overhauling of the whole refugee program and that makes it really challenging.*

Another staff member at the same organization described how lack of funding also led to staffing issues. In particular, as the organization operated with a minimal number of employees, staff members often felt like they did not have sufficient time to thoroughly cater to the participants' needs.

*I think funding is always an issue. You know, cause you can always do more with more money. And I think that's particularly true in terms of staffing. I think if we had more people to help out at the farm it would be beneficial, but we also obviously have survived successfully with volunteer work and a few paid staff positions. I think the dilemma of trying to – you only have so much time to commit to something, but you're wanting to teach someone something, but maybe you do it yourself instead of teaching it one time because you literally just don't have time to sit down and teach them.*

In addition to a lack of funding and resources, staff members also identified external accountability, or demonstration of outcomes to funding agencies, as a point of concern for their organization. As one staff member explained, tracking outcomes for a number of different programs was difficult at times. In addition, finding ways to balance meeting the needs of the participants with standards required by funding agencies was also difficult.

*With so many programs, it's hard to track them all. Depending on the program, we'll sit down, like this year the arts program, we got some feedback from a vendor saying we think that your program is excellent. We think that you're doing everything that we want. We just don't think you're tracking it. So if you spend some time and really look at laying out for us – because we're doing all these art projects – but how are those projects meeting the Missouri state standards for education in liberal arts? So then it's sitting down with the team. In certain areas, I see more people helping, but that is more me sitting down with our students saying, okay, this is what the fund director is saying we need. Who do we have that's qualified to come up with curriculum? We're doing this activity, which meets these national and state standards. So then I'll go back and package it.*

Despite this, organizations were careful to not develop programs with the sole purpose of receiving funds, and were very conscious of the fine line between maintaining financial stability for their organization and being accountable and responsive to the needs of the participants. As one staff member described,

. *I kind of come with the perspective of this is what we need to show what we're doing. And to me, it's a fine line. I like to think, so, what do we want to do as an organization? What do we want to do as a program? And how that will make us most competitive for funding. Because you can't just do things necessarily to meet funders' needs. So what's the middle line there? What do we want to accomplish in the program that will also make it stand out?*

This staff member continued to explain how maintaining the integrity of their programs and meeting the needs of their clientele was always at the forefront of fundraising efforts.

*But we do seem to have this commitment to providing services with integrity and using best practices as it relates to [the] population, and advocating for that. I think a lot of that comes from some of the really great staff that we have. My perspective on [fundraising] is I love for people to be able to say, hey, I don't think you said this right. I like to use language that matches the message and matches the thing we're actually doing, versus you use the fundraising industry to identify our program as being kind of on the cutting edge. And I think they are in terms of really integrating the cultural experience of individuals into their individual needs. So packaging that in that way, really emphasizing that.*

This study also revealed an additional challenge of unequal relations of power between the staff members and the immigrant women. Some staff members were aware of the underlying relationships of power between staff members and immigrant women participants that could override other relational hierarchies, such as age. Because of these power differentials, staff members hoped that the message of capability was apparent to the participants and that it would help rectify any potential imbalances of power.

*It's very hard when you're working with people with limited English. Sometimes it's hard to be sure that you're treating [them] with the respect that they deserve because of their age, especially for me because I'm so much younger than a lot of the farmers. The fact that they look to us for advice and help, it is a different type of relationship than what it normally would be in my community or their community. If we were in the same ethnic group, I would treat them differently and they would treat me differently. Sometimes I'm aware of that and I want to make sure that our program treats them as adults and very capable people because they really are and there's a lot that we learn from them too.*

When other staff members spoke of their awareness of the potential for imbalances of power, it is clear that they perceived their relationships with the clients differently as they believed their relationship was one in which the learning is mutual.

*I think with the goal being self-sufficiency of them, I think there is on the one hand, we're trying to teach them things. With a teacher and a learner, I feel*

*like there's automatically kind of a little bit of a hierarchy there. I don't know how to explain it. I mean, I don't think, it's not super formal and it's not in a negative way. I don't know, I tend to think of hierarchies in a somewhat negative way, but I don't think it is. I feel like I learn just as much from them as they learn from me.*

Not only was learning a mutual effort, but NGOs' staff also felt that the process of serving the immigrant participants and improving their quality of life as they resettled was a team effort and required as much work from these women as it did from the staff.

*We want to make sure that they feel equipped with whatever tools they need to get their voice heard. So, whatever that looks like or whatever their toolkit needs to look like, we want to make sure that we are helping them find those tools so that they feel that if I get run over by the bus tomorrow, I want to make sure that they can still go on and feel like they can go ahead and make a phone call. So, that's our efforts for the next couple of months is just trying to figure out, can we instill some more of this knowledge and then relate it back? You expressed to us that this was a concern of yours. This is how we are helping, but also this is how you can also guide us along so that it's a team effort and it doesn't solely fall on you and it doesn't solely fall on us.*

Another staff member explained how she was conscious of making it clear to the participants in the organization that not only was the partnership between staff members and immigrant women participants a team effort, but that as participants, they provided valuable contributions to the organization.

*I'm certainly not going to pretend like I'm the expert here in this Neighborhood. And that's [what] I always tell people. I'm like, you know, this is what my background is, these are the skills I have. However, you bring this to the table and this is why I think you and I would be a wonderful team.*

This staff member continued to describe how she viewed the staff and client relationship in a more egalitarian manner.

*Right now, we are in the mindset of, we want to make sure people don't see us as givers and their receivers. We want to make sure that people see this as a two-way relationship. You know, we're here to support you and you're here to support us. We are here to be respectful of each other, to honor each other, so*

*more of that kind of relationship. At least that's my hope within my own projects.*

The staff also demonstrated a commitment to a more egalitarian relationship with immigrant women participants through their need to identify and connect with the immigrant women. Staff spoke of engaging with the participants in a more familial and intimate manner than most relationships between staff and clients in social service settings. Staff described attending Karen weddings and preparing meals in the participants' homes. One staff member, in order to increase the participants' market earnings from the sale of their produce, helped the Burmese women to write a cookbook with Burmese dishes featuring the vegetables the women sold at the market. To do this, the staff member spent extra time in the women's homes, learning how to cook traditional Burmese dishes. She also spoke of the bonding relationship between her and Burmese women over common experiences. Another staff member felt that the duties of her job allowed her to forge these connections with the participants.

*I find all the farmers are really easy to talk to, just in general. We can always talk about the things in common with your family. I definitely feel like I have spent a significant amount of time especially with the ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and sitting around at market. If there is a lull in market you just end up talking to people and definitely feel that there is a lot of connection time there.*

Another challenge the organizations encountered was the hierarchical staffing structure within the NGO. The organizations' staff members were able to operate in a more collaborative and egalitarian, or horizontal, manner among themselves despite using a hierarchical staffing model. This commitment to more egalitarian relationships between staff members was due, in part, to the director's



management tactics. When speaking with interns and volunteers, they mentioned that one director, in particular, had a good rapport with the staff, which engendered more flexibility and informality within the hierarchical structure of the organization.

*When I said it's informal, what I mean, primarily, is that I don't ever feel like I need to clear everything I do with [the director]. I feel like I design a lot of my schedule myself. She will tell me when things need to be done, but then in the blanks I'm just finding parts of the program that I can help with on my own. I just feel like we don't have such a hierarchy as some places.*

In another organization, the director, herself, expressed how she viewed the work that she and her staff did as a more collaborative process despite the hierarchical way the organization was staffed.

*And then the staff, I feel like we're pretty collegial as far as there's good collaboration. We meet every Monday morning and we look ahead at what's coming up. We talk about if there is a new volunteer. We all interview that person together. Ultimately, I mean it's my decision, but we really do it together. I feel on a day-to-day basis, we make the decisions. The staff here makes the decision and we try to listen to the volunteers, what they say, and the women, what they say.*

In addition to engendering a more collaborative process, a more flexible hierarchical structure can help keep an organization open to new ideas. At a different organization, a staff member described how the director contributed to a more informal hierarchical structure.

*There's always random tasks. For the most part, our structure is pretty informal, but it's really great to have someone like [the director] who has been with the program from its beginning stages and really understands why we do things the way we do. She is also open to new ideas all the time, so it's good that we have people coming in consistently and offering new ideas.*

The NGOs in this study enacted additional innovative and creative ways to ensure they were countering the challenges of power relations and hierarchies within the organization. For example, the organizations demonstrated a higher

capacity for adaptability by being more receptive to new ideas regarding the day-to-day operations of the organization. This flexibility and willingness to change is important because it demonstrates that the bureaucracy of the organization does not prevent it from finding creative and innovative ways to develop more egalitarian relationships and being more accountable to the women participants. One staff member described how the organization demonstrated a willingness to alter their procedures if it meant that they were better serving the participants.

*And so, I think we're reaching the point now where we have a really good stable ground and we're wanting to kind of change some of those things that have become set patterns in the program and make it so that it's something that is learned. Something that the farmers can do on their own, rather than something that we do for them, because now we're getting to the point where we have the staff and the time to be able to do that.*

An organization's willingness to be flexible in its approach to staffing hierarchies and to be open to new ideas from all stakeholders in the organization also demonstrates the organization's ability for self-evaluation. The NGOs in this study engaged in self-evaluation not only to meet funding agencies' requirements, but also to maintain the integrity of their organization and effectively serve the immigrant women participants. For example, another one of the NGOs has received a grant to assist them with self-evaluation in the form of cultural competency training. Cultural competency, through the use of a trained consultant, allows organizations to examine their policies and programs and assess whether they best serve the population that they are trying to serve. One staff member described cultural competency training as follows

*We've been working with a couple of consultants and we've been meeting, I think it's been for about a year and a half, to really look at ourselves internally. It does make a difference in the way that our staff thinks about culture and*

*language and differences and diversity and all those kind of keywords and how we function as an agency. Because if we are aware of those things, and we are being sensitive to those things, then we believe that that's going to transfer down to the way that we provide our services. That it's always going to be with their experience in mind. So what is your experience as an immigrant in this country? And we can provide them [with] a service that aligns more with that particular person's needs. So it's kind of broad and general, but I think we are kind of in that process right now of figuring that out and looking at our internal systems. Are they sensitive to the way that we interact with Spanish-speaking immigrant women? Our physical environment - if a person walks into our building, do they feel safe? Do they feel welcome? Or do they just feel like it's a cold lobby? Or how are they being greeted? So all of those little things, we're actually really taking a hard look at because we want to create an environment that's inclusive, and that is safe, and warm, and welcoming to anybody.*

The cultural competency initiative for this particular organization is funded by The Healthcare Foundation of Kansas City and the Reach Foundation. Through their grant for cultural competency, the NGO was able to hire an external consultant who works nationally to help NGOs become more culturally competent. With the assistance of the consultant, the organization establishes a committee that can consist of people both internal and external to the organization, depending on what the organization prefers. One staff member described the consultant's approach to assisting the organization with cultural competence.

*But his way of approaching this is not, well, let's look at the checklist. This is what you need to do as an organization to be culturally competent. Check, check, check. You're done. You're ready to go. You're all set to serve. You're ready to be inclusive. I mean it's really interesting because a lot of it is having to sit around the table and having some very hard discussions. And it's almost kind of like taking a look - kind of putting yourself out there with just your intimates on. We need to talk about these things, yes, while we provide services that are in Spanish, and that's kind of what we're known for, it doesn't mean that we don't have room for improvement. So it's taking that hard look inside. So we do that as individuals sometimes, self-reflect. This is like as an agency, let's take a hard look inside, and how are we being inclusive to those that we serve or that we anticipate that we might serve in the future? Because communities change, right? I mean look at the history of Mattie Rhodes. It's only in our recent history, have we been serving Latinos. So, it's a really cool*

*process. And it isn't just about a checklist. Oh check. You provide Spanish brochures. Check, you have interpreters. Check, you've got a sign on the bathroom in Spanish. It's not just about that. It's about understanding how you function as an agency to be sensitive to others, to anybody.*

This particular organization not only involves staff members in their self-evaluation process, but also invites immigrant women participants to take part in the discussions that will engender more cultural competence. In addition, as part of the cultural competency initiative, the organization holds a monthly meeting, referred to as the Learning Community, which is open to the public. Through the Learning Community, the organization engages participants and staff members in discussions, listening to speakers, and viewing videos of well-known scholars and speakers on different topics, including issues of racism and social inequality.

NGOs' self-evaluation efforts are also evident in the way they seek feedback from their women participants. Funders often require that organizations demonstrate that desired outcomes are being met and that clients are receiving services and are benefitting from programs as the organization initially planned. NGOs often demonstrate outcomes through satisfaction surveys administered to the participants. However, some of these organizations have increasingly grown concerned that these evaluative tools are not as useful as they primarily provide non-critical "satisfactory" or "yes" answers. Two of the NGOs in this study have sought out different methods for collecting participant feedback that provides a more critical evaluation of the NGOs' programs, activities, and services. One of the organizations has struggled with finding the best way to approach getting more critical feedback.

*Annually in October, we do evaluations with the farmers. So it's during that time, we meet with each farmer for a couple of hours and we evaluate how their production and marketing was this year and then they kind of give us feedback on how the program worked, any feedback that they have. I haven't felt like getting feedback from folks has worked very well. We tried it a couple of different ways. I tried asking the questions, because I feel like they know me, they trust me. Then I'm like, they just tell me what I want to hear. So we also have tried to have an outside person ask the questions. That didn't work super well, either. So I feel like we're always kind of honing that and figuring out how we can get more feedback.*

Another NGO found that focus groups enabled the participants to not only give constructive feedback but also offer suggestions for marketing the organizations' programs and voice ideas for future program development. As one staff member described, funding agencies were concerned that the organization was reporting high levels of participant satisfaction. However, with the introduction of focus groups, the organization found that they had more leverage with the funding agencies as they were obtaining more critical feedback from the participants.

*Recently in a grant interview, they said – it's kind of their format, where you go after applying. They ask you questions about the application. One of the things they ask is your sensitivity is really high satisfaction. We were wondering if you're asking the right questions. We say we feel the same way, and we've been trying a few things to get a better picture of how people feel about our services. That's why we've included focus groups. They seem really fascinated and think that's a good idea, too. So it does provide us a little bit of that leverage, to say we are doing our best to hear from people. I mean I still think we could go a long ways with it. I think we're still in the initial stages of it.*

The staff member continued to describe the questions they asked at their most recent focus group as well as some of the feedback they received from the participants.

*So, the questions we asked were how is it you first learned about Mattie Rhodes? Think back to when you first visited Mattie Rhodes. What were your first impressions? Is there anything you'd like to see done differently? How does Mattie Rhodes know that we are successful? That one, the first time it went over really well, and the second time I thought, eh. Maybe I didn't word*

*that super well. We usually get feedback, “when you first visited Mattie Rhodes, what were your first impressions?” We get generally pretty positive. There were a lot of people that were like I had no idea everything that happened at Mattie Rhodes Center. So we get a lot of feedback that we feel you should market more. They were giving us feedback on you should have signs up in the classroom, or therapy services for youth, or youth development programs. She’s like make it blunt. Is your child having trouble in school? Call Mattie Rhodes. Or you should be in the churches on Sunday. She’s like if you want me to go, I’ll go and talk about parenting classes in churches, because I think a lot of parents would be interested. So they were like giving us all these marketing ideas, how to get people involved. Or people that had been through once, but then came back and were shocked that we had soccer and all the different things that we have. I hadn’t heard that. So I walked in, and I was busier than ever.*

In addition to trying focus groups, this organization has also thought about whether it is better to have someone external to the organization conduct the focus groups in order to further get more honest and open feedback.

*So yeah, we started in 2012 essentially. Then since I’ve stayed on, it’s actually more ideal now. I think, ideally, we’d get to the point where we’d have an external facilitator. We want people to feel open in sharing about their experience. So I’m a little bit detached from that direct service experience. That’s something I’ve always thought it would be nice to get someone from outside the agency to come and facilitate.*

They also originally tried focus groups comprised of a mixture of participants from different programs, but found that the women were less likely to be comfortable sharing and voicing their opinions as they did when they had been all participating in the same program such as with the parenting classes.

*That’s a great setting for it. We’ve had really great, positive feedback on parenting groups. They already have a comfort with each other. That’s another thing, because we’ve been trying to get a variety, get people from different programs. It takes a while for people to feel comfortable. So with that dynamic, it seems people are very used to sharing.*

Despite the challenges and obstacles to getting more honest and open feedback, the focus groups did give the participants an avenue for being able to voice their own ideas for new activities and opinions on how to improve existing programs.

*There's an interesting thing of like ideas of what other programs Mattie Rhodes should provide. That's GED (General Educational Development) classes, cooking classes comes up every now and then, groups for couples was a big one they had said there. And I think it was someone who used to have group for couples like years ago, and they really enjoyed it. The last time they said that they had loved, loved, loved the parenting class. "But sometimes I go home and I feel like I don't know what to do, so I would like to have someone willing to come into my house and show me and demonstrate for me some of these techniques with my kids, or let me know when I'm speaking incorrectly to them." That's so true. I've always felt like that's what we should offer. So it's good to hear from people. Then you know, from my end, going into grants, we can say this is developed, and the community, and you know, probably not if one person says it. But the focus group, we can kind of see where the themes are and which direction we want to go even as an organization in terms of some of these things.*

These adaptability and self-evaluation processes have demonstrated the NGOs' commitment to downward accountability (Kilby 2006) through finding new and innovative ways to collaborate with the participants and give them, to some extent, ownership over the organization's activities and programs despite the bureaucratic and hierarchical structures that may be in place within the organization.

The NGOs have found that their willingness to incorporate participants in the development of activities and programs not only gave participants ownership over the program but also facilitated the development of their leadership skills. For example, one of the organizations had several participants graduate from their Easy English classes and then go on to teach the same class from which they graduated.

*I know we have a number of success stories where they came for literacy, or they came for English, and we said, "you've done so well, you could move to literacy," which is more demanding. And now they're helping – they're doing a group. We have several of our Easy English tutors [who] were themselves [participants].*

In one of the other NGOs, the director recruited three of the current participants in the program to participate in the planning of a regional conference for immigrant farmers. One staff member described some of the challenges with organizing the conference in this way.

*What I observe, with the Midwest Refugees Conference, [the director] had a, I think that may have been the first time, but she brought a group of people together. A couple of people from different ethnic groups and the main challenge with it is just the interpreters. So, how can a group of people like that communicate? And she said they just had to be very slow and very intentional about that. Translating and answering and translating back and, so, that I think is the main challenge for them, specifically; whereas, if you were with one language group, you could do that a lot easier.*

Despite these challenges, this demonstrates the organization's commitment to including participants in the development of the organization's programs and activities. Staff also spoke of how one of the participants in the planning committee began to exhibit leadership abilities. Other immigrant women in the program now look to her for advice.

*There are three of the new farmers this year that are in her same [ethnic group] and so that's given her kind of a leadership role in a really positive way. So, a lot of them have kind of looked up to her to ask questions and figure out what they should be doing.*

As the organizations work to find creative and innovative ways to include the participants in the development of their activities and programs, staff members have found that a more participatory and active role for the immigrant women in the organization facilitates processes of empowerment for the women. This is evidenced by those participants whom staff members have identified as adopting more leadership roles in their community. In addition, the women's participation in the NGOs' programs has cultivated relationships of support among the immigrant



women and alleviated some of the isolation that immigrant women often experience as they resettle. In particular, these processes are significant because the organizations have demonstrated a commitment to more egalitarian relationships between their staff and clients despite securing grants and donor funds for their organization and operating with bureaucratic and hierarchical structures.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: EMPOWERMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN**

In the following chapter, *first*, I examine how the immigrant women participants define empowerment. This section of the chapter also analyzes how downward accountability within the organizations facilitates the process of empowerment for immigrant women. *Second*, I explain the theoretical significance of an analysis of immigrant women's involvement in Kansas City based NGOs and their perceptions of empowerment.

#### **Immigrant Women and Notions of Empowerment**

In this section, first I discuss the background of the immigrant women in this study, describing their time of residency in Kansas City and in the program as well as their family life and employment status. Then, I explain how the immigrant women conceptualize empowerment based on their participation within the NGOs' programs and activities. Through my analysis of the data, four themes of empowerment emerged. *First*, the immigrant women I spoke with identified the acquisition of financial and business skills as significant to their empowerment. *Second*, the women described the positive impact their participation in the program had on their family life. *Third*, the women explained how their participation facilitated empowerment by fostering their community and social involvement. *Fourth*, the women felt their empowerment process was facilitated by a more egalitarian distribution of power between themselves and the staff members of the NGOs. While these are general, broad themes of empowerment, certain subthemes

of leadership, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency also emerge from my analysis of the data.

The length of residency in Kansas City varied for each of the immigrant women in this study. Many of the Burmese and Karen women had more recently relocated to the Kansas City area, with the majority of them residing in the area for fewer than three years. Some of these women, however, were secondary migrants, having originally resettled to another city or state in the United States, such as San Diego, St. Louis, or Illinois. After having been there for a number of years and unable to find employment, they moved to Kansas City. Many of these women were married and their husbands were employed at a local meatpacking plant. Some of the women occasionally held part time jobs, such as at a laundromat or Fed Ex, but relied on the husband's wage earnings as the primary source of income. Many of the women also were responsible for caring for their small children, which further prevented them from maintaining full time employment. The Mexican women, however, had resided in the Kansas City area for a longer time – between twelve and twenty-one years. Their employment situation was very similar to the Burmese and Karen women, with some of them working part time at a restaurant or cleaning offices. Many of them also had small children to care for, which restricted their ability to work full time. Both the Burmese, Karen, and Mexican women had participated in the organizations for fewer than five years.

The *first* source of empowerment that was evident in my discussion with the participants was an *acquisition of financial and business skills*. One participant

described the activities the organization did to help her prepare to sell in the market.

*They teach us how to sell in the market. Even we don't speak English, they teach us how to sell in the market and how to write a check. Sometimes [the customer] give the note, \$20, but they have to change the small note. We're learning right now. They taught us how to weight the fruits and veggies. And they taught us how to deposit in the bank and how much we need to deposit in the bank and how much of that to pay Kansas to the government.*

Another immigrant participant explained how the staff conducted annual reviews in which the women learned how to project their future earnings.

*[The staff members] will estimate, like this year we will earn this much and then for the next year what they think about how much we will get or something like that, and then they will give us a grade.*

In addition to learning how to conduct business transactions and maintain a business account, the women also described the marketing and customer service skills they acquired during their time participating in the program. One woman described these skills that she learned from attending the workshops.

*[The director], she taught us how to make the market, how to sell in the market and how to make the tents and just doing the tables, arrange the fruits and veggies. And just to meet customers.*

Another woman also explained what she learned about customer service from her participation in the workshops.

*I understand more rules, like about when there are customers who come in front of your table, like if they are falling or something like that, you have to take response. Another thing is about cleaning. So, you have to clean everything that you do there and then how to set up the veggie and make it really pretty and unique.*

Yet another woman explained how she felt more comfortable selling at the market due to her involvement in the organization.

*I learned a lot of things. Especially how to sell, I never knew how to sell at market. So, right now, since I've been involved in this program, I'm getting better at selling things.*

Although the women were able to acquire some additional, supplementary income from their work at the market, this is not the main function of this first theme of empowerment. Rather, the confidence they gain from recognizing their ability to learn English and successfully conduct a business and build rapport with their customers is the main source of empowerment for these women. One woman described how the skills she gained through selling at the market impacted other aspects of her life and made her more confident and better able to navigate her life as she resettled in the Kansas City area.

*I have more confidence now than before. When we first got here, we need a lot of help, especially going appointments, visiting doctors, and buying some things, and the grocery. Whatever we need, we always ask somebody to help us. But now, after selling in market, I learned oh, I can do by myself some things. Even I can talk, I can still use my gestures. And American people are good, they know what I say or do. So, right now we don't need much help to do things we can do by ourselves. First, now we can go buy our own grocery and I can set up own appointment for kids and I can make some phone calls by myself. And if the TV or computer is broke, we can go by our own to the store and fix it there. And even in our apartment, if something is wrong, I went to the manager and I talk what is broken. Now we're planning to buy a house, so I can talk and text by myself to the agent.*

The **second** source of empowerment that emerged through my discussions with the women was the **impact their participation in the organization had on their family life**. This was apparent in several ways. With the financial and business knowledge that some of the participants gained, they were able to secure additional, supplementary income. This benefited their family, as they were able to purchase necessary household items such as furnishings as one participant described.

*I get to help the house and also get the education about farming. You know, if you moved out of the place then you have to buy all the furniture. So, I get to spend some money for it.*

Another participant also described how she was able to use the supplementary income to buy necessary items for her family's household.

*Through involving New Roots program, I earned some money and with that money I bought some things very necessary to the family. This is one of the benefits - I bought a freezer. We made some fruits and plants and when the winter nears, we just store it there and we don't need to buy things.*

The same participant also described how she was able to purchase life insurance for her family with the income she earned through selling her produce at market.

*My involvement in [the] New Roots program, I could buy life insurance for myself to benefit my kids.*

Another participant explained how the income she earned helped her buy a car for her family.

*I only have the girls that are older, so I couldn't save money to buy a car. But now, because I am working, there are some things like buy a car, and then pay [the] bills. Also, I don't have to buy much veggies.*

Yet another participant described how the supplementary income helped her family pay the bills.

*I can save money for my family because I have to pay the bills. Not only the husband can afford that. So, I help my husband sometimes so that I know its benefit.*

Bringing in supplementary income and using it to purchase some necessary items for the family's well being means that the women are able to adopt a provider role within their family. This expands the roles available to women to go beyond just caregiver and empowers the women as they have more choices available to them as

they resettle in the Kansas City area. Adopting a provider role within the family also allows for more egalitarian roles between the husband and wife.

In addition, the self-sufficiency that comes with extra income negates the victimized construction that NGOs often have of the immigrant woman and opens up roles for women within the organization that go beyond receivers of assistance. One woman described an increased self-sufficiency in her ability to sell at the market without assistance.

*The first year, I learned how to sell in the market. They trained us and the next year, I don't need help. I can do by myself right now.*

Therefore, the women's participation in the farmers' markets is not only important for the agency of the women within the family but also the agency of the women within the organization. As the women are successful in their market ventures and secure additional income, the staff members in the organization develop a more positive perception of the women's capabilities and skills.

For the women in the farm training program, their participation in the organization not only provided them with the ability to earn extra income, but they were able to do so while continuing to care for their children. This meant that the women were able to access additional income without worrying about the expense of childcare. One woman described how she was able to take her children with her while she worked on her plot of land.

*Because I cannot speak English and also I have kids and I cannot find a job. It's kind of helped me to be working there, like at a job. I have a kid, so I cannot leave my kids for a long time. So, working in the garden I can just go back and then come back, like different from another job.*

Another participant also described how she was able to enjoy her work at the farm without worrying about securing childcare for her children.

*Gardening is my hobby and since its very hard to do some jobs with kids. So, it's very convenient for me, if I want to work in the garden, I can brought my kids and I can still work there. So it's very convenient for me. And when we sow the seeds, and it grows up and its very green, we're very excited.*

For other women, their participation in the organization, particularly by selling produce at the market, did not necessarily give them enough income to support their family, but allowed them to contribute to the health of their family through access to fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables that they otherwise would not have the money to buy. One woman explained how her ability to grow her own fresh fruits and vegetables enabled her family to remain healthy despite having little money to spend on food.

*Actually, our garden, our roots are just amazing, so it help a little bit for self-sufficiency, but not really for employment. It's impacted a lot. Even how to make sufficiency out of insufficiency. One of the example is it is really organic fresh fruits and veggies so it's really good for us*

Another woman explained how her participation helped the situation of food access for her family.

*We don't need to buy any fruits or veggies because we already have in our garden. So, it saves a lot of money, and we sell it in the market and we save some money. Even if we don't work in the winter, but sometimes I look for some part-time job for the winter.*

Yet another woman expressed similar thoughts on the importance of access to fresh fruits and vegetables for her family.

*You know, Asian people, we mostly eat veggies so if we have to spend our money for vegetables, it's going to cost a lot. So that benefits, we don't need to buy vegetables in the summertime.*



Participants in other organizations also did not describe the benefit to their family in monetary terms, but rather spoke of the emotional support they received from others in the organization and how it allowed them to be more emotionally available for their family.

*We have benefit. Because we are happier, and in my case, when I go home, I feel like a new life. I feel refreshed and happier. I do things at home. If I didn't have the class, I just stay there, watching TV. I didn't want to do anything. I didn't have energy. When you learn things, it makes you more available for your children.*

The women's ability to find different sources of support and self-esteem, whether through supplementary income, providing for their family, or emotional support from others, facilitates their empowerment as they not only gain a more positive self-perception of themselves, but the staff members within the organizations also develop more positive perceptions of the women as they see the women become more self-sufficient, both financially and emotionally.

Lastly, the woman that participated in the farm training program identified how their participation helped them to pass on their farming skills and knowledge to their children.

*Also like another benefit is some kids who go here, they don't know how to go plant, so maybe their kids will know that they are working there and other kids will help out.*

The involvement of the children in the cultivation of crops and the selling of produce at the market not only helps women transfer their farming skills to their children but also helps strengthen the family bonds during their process of resettlement. This also places the women in a leadership role within the family. This is significant as it expands the roles available to women so that they are able to be more than just

caregivers. In addition, research has demonstrated that within immigrant families, the assimilation process is easier for children as they are in school and therefore are better able to learn English and acculturate (Venezuela 1999, Martinez, Jr. et. al. 2009). Oftentimes, this causes children to take on the roles and responsibilities of the parents as the mother and father look to the children to help them navigate life as they resettle. Involving the children in the mother's farming business allows the immigrant women to demonstrate their farming and entrepreneurial capabilities to the children and therefore, the immigrant women adopt additional roles within their family other than caregiver. It also enables them to maintain their parental roles as they instruct their children on what needs to be done to make the venture successful.

**Thirdly**, the women spoke of how their participation facilitated empowerment by *fostering their community and social involvement*. Most of the women spoke of their participation as beneficial because it provided them with a social outlet. One woman described how she would go to the training farm and speak with the other participants even if there were no classes or workshops being held that day.

*If there is no workshop or class, I just always go, I just ask my friends, "how is your plants?" "How is your roots?" "Or how is your garden?"*

Another woman described how her participation, similarly, afforded her the opportunity to meet new friends that she could visit with, increasing her happiness as she felt less isolated and more like she was in her home country.

*In our own land, our culture is, when we have free time, we just go and visit with our friends and talk and share things. But, in the United States, it's quite different. Now, visiting and now sharing and everything is different here. But,*

*when we sell things, we made some new friends and we share things and I feel like at home.*

At another organization, one woman explained how much she relied on her weekly meetings with the other women.

*It has been very helpful for me. Sometimes I get depressed and then – it forces me to get out of the house. One day we didn't have class and I miss them a lot. It is like my week, it is so flat.*

In addition, many of the participants discussed how much they enjoyed meeting immigrants from other countries and the diversity in perspectives this provided them as they resettled in the Kansas City area.

*At first I told them, if you're being at home and just stay home so you're not involved in anything, it's because you're not going out and talking to friends. But, if you're in the program, you have to talk to people. I get to see more ethnic groups. Also, have more friends because involved in [the] New Roots program.*

Another participant described how she enjoyed the exposure to different cultures at the marketplace.

*I gets to see more people, because when we were in Thailand, we don't see a lot of people. But, when you go to the market, you will see like many ethnic groups there.*

Yet another participant echoed similar sentiments of how she enjoyed meeting a diverse group of immigrants from many different countries.

*Know more, not only Karen people, not only white people, but people that are already resettled here. Like at market, not only Karen people just go there, but many kinds of people are coming to buy things*

Some of the women in another organization described how their participation in the women's group not only allowed them to make friends, but led them to join and participate in other activities within the community.

*Coming here has helped me a lot. It forces me out. Also I have made friends and my friends are now involving me in other groups and learning English and a Zumba class.*

Another participant from that women's group described how she was also able to get out of the house and learn new things.

*I like coming because I learn new things. It gets me out of the house and services, like [the speaker] last week from MOCSA. Every little bit helps – just talking. When I don't have anything to do, the day becomes very long.*

Not only did the participants find meeting other immigrant women helpful in alleviating their social isolation, they also found that when struggling with depression, they received a lot of support from others they met in the organization. One woman described the depression that she experienced as an immigrant whose family had incurred significant medical debt due to her uninsured husband's illness. Not only did she have medical bills to worry about paying, but she also had the responsibility of maintaining the household and working to provide for her family.

*I think most of us have been in depression. I think because we have to pay the bills and then my bill came out \$120,000. So, I was feeling bad because my husband has to work two jobs and then I tell him, you know, if I have to go back to Mexico and then I got depressed and it was very hard.*

After describing her situation, she continued to speak about how her participation in the women's group helped her to cope with what seemed like an insurmountable situation.

*I am getting better. Everyone tells me that I am smiling more now. And I have had some support from the group too. We bonded, I think. So we can talk to each other. Working together with my husband is good. I still feel guilty about not giving time to the children, but my husband and I have to work to pay for medications and medical care.*

In addition to meeting other immigrant women and garnering support from their friendships, the women described how their participation in the organization

fostered relationships with Americans, which they enjoyed as they were able to learn English and assimilate to their new life. One of the women described how her life and happiness had improved since she had more opportunities to participate in the broader American community.

*First, we can eat fresh fruits and veggies. Second, we have a lot of friends. And then I learn some English and then I met American people. Actually, when before we came here to the United States, we were afraid to talk to others. Like when I sell veggies and fruits, I'm not afraid now. I'm happy.*

The same woman continued to explain how her interaction with Americans at the marketplace increased her confidence, helping to develop her skills selling at the market.

*We met American people. I learned a lot of things from them, especially how to sell. I never knew how to sell at market. So, since I've been involved in this program, I'm getting better at selling things.*

Another woman expressed similar sentiments of how her work at the marketplace also helped her develop her social skills and gave her more confidence.

*One way it impact my life - since we brought up in a very small village, so our social life is down there. So we didn't know how to talk with the strange ones, like new friends. So when I sell at market, some of the people come and talk to me. I learn a lot, the way they talk with us, so, that has really affected my life. I learn some how to have more confidence in myself, and talk others and make new friends. Yes, more confidence in myself.*

Another woman felt that her involvement in the organization also forged connections with the broader American community.

*I get more involved in the community. It's because I get to meet new friends, like other farmers. Also in the seasons, the college students will come and do the volunteer so I meets the college students and have fun with them and talks to them.*

Yet another woman explained how she felt accepted as she participated in the broader American community and how this increased her self-confidence.

*The reason why I feel good about it is because out of a lot of white people, there is only one Karen people there. But the customer buy from me also, even if she is not white. And they will say something like, "your fruit looks pretty and tastes good." So, I feel good about it.*

Some of the women also described how their participation in selling at the market helped them to feel like they were productive, participatory members of the community. One woman described how she feels like she's contributing to the health of her community by providing them with fresh fruits and vegetables.

*I'm a farmer, so I will sell the veggie to my community so my community gets to eat fresh veggies.*

Therefore, as the women spoke of how their participation in their organization's activities made them feel more socially connected to both their immigrant community and the broader American community, their discussions also indicated an increase in confidence. In particular, the women exhibited some leadership qualities as they found themselves in a teaching role with other participants in the organization. Many of the participants explained how their involvement in the organization opened up possibilities for them to teach new participants the skills that they had learned about growing their crops and selling their produce at the market. One woman explained

*I am one of the Karenni groups and I am the first Karenni to become involved in New Roots. That's why I learned a lot from friends, at workshop, and from [the director] and from New Roots. As I learn, I taught the Karenni people how to sell at the market.*

In addition, the women found that new participants often came to them with questions about how to succeed in the program. The same woman explained later in her interview how other participants often came to her with questions about growing their own crops.

*Other people just come and ask me – especially the new people. I told them the system or how to plant. So if they ask me how to plant, I tell them. But, if beyond that, I ask them to go to [the director] for some explanation.*

Another woman explained, similarly, how new participants came to her for help as they started cultivating their plants.

*Especially with the new people, when they come into the New Roots program, we taught them which seeds are good to plant at this time and what kind of seeds are not good for this season. So, we help them, and we explain them what we know and we share what we have.*

Yet another woman also explained how after three years in the program, new participants were coming to her with questions.

*Because I've been here three years, the other farmers, the new farmers, will ask me, "how do you mix the soil, and then what did you do when you first plant or transplant?" - those kinds of things.*

When speaking with the women that had graduated from the program, they described how they continued to assume leadership roles within the organization.

One woman graduate explained how she remained in contact with the staff members and participants in the program and how she helped the participants when visiting the training farm.

*Sometimes we will go visit and see the place and some of the farmers will ask us something that they don't know how to do. So, we will help and tell them what do you need to do for this and that. Yeah, I am glad to help them.*

These leadership roles are significant as they allow the women to adopt more complex and varied roles within the organization. This contributes to the immigrant women's agency as they are able to demonstrate their capabilities and skills. Cultivating these leadership roles within the organization also helps staff to move past binary, homogenous constructions of the women as victims or just receivers of assistance. Therefore, the staff members are more open to developing

perceptions of the immigrant women that are more representative of the diversity in the immigrant women's experiences and abilities.

A *fourth*, and final, theme of empowerment identified by the immigrant women was a more **egalitarian distribution of power between staff and participants**. This was most apparent in the subthemes that emerged in my analysis of the data that described the immigrant women's feelings of responsibility to maintain the reputation of the organization, ownership over the programs activities, and offering suggestions and critiques to the directors regarding the programs. The women's statements indicated downward accountability in the organization as the women felt their participation played a vital role in the program. Downward accountability is crucial to the functioning of the organization as it determines relationships of power and representation. In addition, downward accountability affects processes of empowerment as it determines the distribution of power between staff and participants. Downward accountability facilitates empowerment when the distribution of power opens up the possibilities for the participants to have some degree of control over the functioning of the NGO through providing critical insight into the development of the organization's programs and activities.

The women I spoke with expressed concern that their participation would directly influence the integrity of the program. One of the women described why she put forth the effort to help others with cultivating her crops so that the organization would continue to remain reputable.

*We taught them all how to sell at market. If you sell at market you have to do like that. Sometimes, even if they don't ask, we tell them because. Even if*



*they don't ask me to help them or give some advice, I just go and talk to them and give them some advice. Since they are involved in the New Roots programs, if they sell their veggies in the market, I just tell them how to sell it, what time is the best time to sell because if they don't sell their veggies and fruits in the proper way then the words will, names will be going down for the month. Because I have more customers now, because they know that New Roots is who makes the garden non-chemical. So, we have more customers. So we have to maintain the customers and give them fresh and organic. As I make good selling, I just want my friends to have good selling too.*

Many of the women with whom I spoke, felt a responsibility to recruit other participants to the program, proclaiming the program's benefits to the new members such as extra income and its benefits for the family. One woman expressed her pride in the program when she discussed why she recruited others to join the program.

*Some friends that I know, I will tell about the New Roots program and they will come and begin working. I will also tell about their experience. When I tell the person to come work in the New Roots program, I will tell them how that will benefit them also. Some people, their income is not enough. So, if they are working there it's kind of like helping their family. So that is one kind of benefit.*

Another participant stated her role in helping to recruit new members for the program and how she expressed to others the benefits from participating in the program.

*Before, [my friend] lived in Illinois, and she said that they don't have any work to do. So I will call them and then they will come here. She is working with New Roots and her husband is working at Triumph Foods. So later on, after they worked, there are many kinds of benefits. So, they can buy - right now she bought land with a house.*

The women I spoke with demonstrated other ways that they felt they held a participatory role and exercised some power in the organization. Some of the women felt ownership over the programs and took initiative to speak with the staff

members about helping to spread the programs to other parts of their community. For example, one woman suggested to the staff that she was interested in helping implement the parenting curriculum at her local church.

*I have a class that I teach the parents while their kids are in the confirmation room. So I teach first communion. It's recommended that the parents and the kids go to the classes, but then they separate them so the kids learn different stuff and the parents learn more parenting and about God and how to involve it in your house. And this class has helped me for everything. I really would like to talk to them at Mattie Rhodes so I can go to the class and teach the parents about family and parenting. Because, someone from the doctor, he went over there and taught the parents. What I learn over there, like techniques, I apply here. I can give good examples in my class to apply for them.*

The participants also demonstrated ownership over the program through their commitment to the organization following graduation from their farming program.

*We are planning to participate in this New Roots program until we find our own garden. And even we own our garden, if there any training, we just want to be involved. And if the New Roots program needs us to help then we'll come to help. Some, they have their own gardens, but when they need help they still come and help them.*

Another example of downward accountability was substantiated by the women's comfort in being critical and openly expressing their concerns to the staff members about the programs shortcomings and offering suggestions for improvement. For example, most of the participants identified their limited English language skills as an obstacle to their success at market. One participant explained how she asked the staff for more English classes so she could better negotiate with and serve her customers at market.

*The problem is the language barrier. When the customer come, we can't negotiate. It's the most problem. So, I ask, I suggest to them to teach us more English so we can build a relationship. Sometimes the customer ask us how do*

*you plant or how do you get the seed or how do you plant those seeds? We can't explain it, so sometimes it makes a problem.*

Participants also felt comfortable making suggestions to the staff members regarding tools and techniques that they felt would help them farm more efficiently. For example, one participant explained how she shared with the staff her suggestions for a better watering system.

*When we have a lot of things to do in the garden, it's better to have a water pipeline. And if we turn on the water pump, then the water flow by itself and water by itself and then we can do more work.*

Another participant also felt comfortable asking the staff members to rearrange how they accessed the items they needed to grow crops.

*Fertilizer, they put it far away so we have to carry it and we have bad pains and after that we have to go back to the market and sell things. So, we have a lot of pains, muscle pains. So, I suggest not to put that far away, just to get it closer.*

The same woman had another suggestion for the staff members regarding what they could do with the extra vegetables.

*When we sell at market, sometime it's a lot vegetables. There's a lot left and so I asked them, "is it possible to partner with a restaurant and then sell it to them?"*

A participant at a different organization explained some ideas she had for classes the organization could offer. In particular, she felt like participants in the organization's programs could benefit from parenting classes where the teacher comes to your home and offers you advice as he/she watches you interact with your own children. Although she thought of this idea after the staff had conducted the focus group, she still felt that she would have been comfortable suggesting it to the staff members. She described how she felt after participating in the most recent focus group led by some of the staff members.

*They gave me confidence, like they were interested. Because, they have the opportunity to ask me what I would like.*

Therefore, as evidenced in the immigrant women's statements, the participants identified how their involvement in the organizations' programs facilitated their processes of empowerment. This was done by their acquisition of business and financial skills, the positive impact on their family life, the community and social involvement their participation fostered, and the egalitarian, or more horizontal, power relations between themselves and the staff.

These forms of empowerment are somewhat categorically similar to the themes of empowerment described by the staff members, such as more participatory roles in the community, increased visibility in the broader American community, and improvements in the immigrant women's quality of life. Both perspectives of the staff members and the immigrant women participants also share overarching themes of the immigrant women's empowerment through leadership, support, and increased community involvement. Both staff members and participants' statements also demonstrated the organizations' accountability to the participants. Staff members explained their commitment to creating more egalitarian relationships between themselves and their clients. This sentiment was directly felt by the participants and evidenced in their descriptions of the ways they felt their involvement in the program was vital to the functioning and integrity of the organization.

## **Theoretical significance**

Global feminist theorists (Basu 1995; Naples and Desai 2002; McCann and Kim 2013; Mohanty 1991; Mohanty 2003; Mies 1986) contend that global forces of capitalism and globalization draw women from a diverse range of societies, cultures, and geographic locations together. As women migrate from Burma, due to political forms of oppression, and from Mexico, due to neoliberal policies that cause economic hardship, they have resettled in Kansas City either through resettlement agencies or as secondary migrants in search of better employment opportunities. The NGOs, serving immigrant women, develop programs and activities that aim to empower these women, drawing a diverse range of women with very different lived, everyday experiences together. In one organization, women from different Burmese ethnicities join together to develop their farming and business skills. In other organizations, women from different regions of Mexico come together in women's support groups, parenting classes, and Easy English classes.

As my research demonstrates, these immigrant women's involvement in Kansas City based NGOs encourages the immigrant women to become more participatory within the organization and within their community and to adopt more leadership roles. This expands the role of the immigrant women beyond caregiver within the family and contributes to the women's agency, as they are able to demonstrate their capabilities and skills. This expansion of roles and agency is significant as it also allows the staff of the NGOs to move past binary, homogenous constructions of the women as victims or receivers of assistance. Global feminisms (Basu 1995; Mohanty 1991; Mohanty 2003; McCann and Kim 2013; Naples and

Desai 2002) aim to cultivate an understanding of Third World women's lives that extends beyond the overstated, homogenous categories of the Third World woman as victimized or disempowered. By adopting leadership roles in the family and within their immigrant community, immigrant women are able to expand the roles available to them and develop an agency that is more complex and opens up numerous avenues for empowerment processes.

Homogenous, overstated categories of the "Third World Woman" are also of concern within organizational structures that are bureaucratic and hierarchical. Within bureaucratic organizations, power relations between staff members and clients often mirror the hierarchical divisions between women from the global South and the global North. Global feminisms (Basu 1995; Naples and Desai 2002; McCann and Kim 2013; Mohanty 1991; Mohanty 2003; Mies 1986) argue that this hierarchical division between women from the global North and the global South engenders colonization of the women's knowledge and imposes Western forms of empowerment on the women that are not representative of the intersecting forces of oppression that these women experience. The NGOs in my study avoid this imposition of western forms of empowerment and in the process incorporate the immigrant women's diverse experiences into the planning and development of the program's activities. For example, one NGO included the immigrant women participants from different countries and ethnicities in the planning of conferences. Another NGO used focus groups to give the women space to voice their concerns and express what they think would better serve them. Incorporating the participants into the program in this way makes the organization more

representative of women's perspectives according to differences in race, ethnicity, class, and culture.

Representation of the immigrant women's interests within NGOs also raises issues of accountability. When organizations create programs and activities that serve funding agencies, rather than serving the immigrant women clientele, then this accountability to funding agencies reinforces hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, exacerbating unequal power relations between staff and clients. (Ebrahim 2003b, Najam 1996, Edwards Hulme 1996). In these instances, programs and activities are not based on the everyday experiences of the immigrant women, but based on the perspectives of funding agencies and what they perceive as important for the immigrant women's lives. Based on my research, I argue that the staff members in these NGOs seek ways to encourage the immigrant women's participation in these NGOs and to ensure the women clientele feel comfortable voicing their concerns. In doing so, these NGOs find innovative and creative ways to encourage more participatory roles of immigrant women in the organizations, countering the challenges and obstacles of bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational structures. Furthermore, as the women become more participatory in the organization, they are more likely to adopt leadership roles within their own community. For example, the immigrant women participants described how they took an active role in teaching and sharing their knowledge with their peers in the organization. This engenders an empowering environment as it encourages the women to draw upon their own everyday experiences and create their own notions of empowerment as they resettle in the Kansas City area.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

### **Summary and Implications of the Findings**

In this dissertation, I examine how NGOs, situated in the global North, contribute to immigrant women's experiences of empowerment. Specifically, I analyze staff members and immigrant women participants' relationships within three NGOs in Kansas City: *New Roots for Refugees*, *Mattie Rhodes Center*, and *Keeler Women's Center*. These organizations serve women from Burma and Mexico who migrate as a result of political and economic reasons. While NGOs aim to serve immigrant women during their resettlement in Kansas City, oftentimes the NGOs are hampered by neoliberal cutbacks in social services. Consequently, these organizations are forced to seek funding from larger international organizations and foundations. As these NGOs secure grants and donations from larger funding agencies, their organization becomes more bureaucratic and hierarchical, which in turn leads to unequal relations of power between staff members and clients. My research demonstrates that, despite bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, some NGOs have found innovative and creative ways to restructure their organizations so that the staff and client relations tend to become more egalitarian and immigrant women have a more participatory role within the organization.

My research also demonstrates that these NGOs have devised ways to balance their ability to enact downward accountability to their participants with the expectations of upward accountability and the need to appease funding agencies. In addition, these NGOs also demonstrate a commitment to internal accountability and



continuous self-evaluation along with external accountability and demonstration of outcomes to donors. Through these complex, dynamic relationships of accountability, the NGOs in this study have demonstrated a commitment to more egalitarian relationships between the staff and participants.

This is most evident in the compatibility between staff and participants' notions of empowerment. Both staff members and immigrant women expressed the importance of support that immigrant women participants received from their peers in the organization, and identified this support as a significant component in the *process of empowerment*. Participants spoke of how the emotional support they received made them more equipped and prepared to deal with day-to-day family issues. Furthermore, the support and social involvement within the organizations were crucial for combating the social isolation that immigrant women often experience. Both staff members and immigrant participants also expressed an awareness of how their participation in the organization increased their involvement within their immigrant community. In addition, the staff members and immigrant women both acknowledged that the women's involvement in the organization encouraged them to adopt more leadership roles. The immigrant women not only became more involved within their own community, but their participation in the organization also increased their visibility within the broader American community. Both staff members and immigrant women participants spoke of how this benefitted the women's lives during their resettlement as it increased their confidence as they were able to develop their English language skills and felt more accepted within the broader American community.

Not only do shared notions of empowerment demonstrate a commitment to egalitarian relations between staff and participants, it also demonstrates that when organizations are able to devise ways to overcome bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, the staff has more positive perceptions of the immigrant women participants. Recent scholarship finds that the majority of organizations operate on assumptions that portray immigrant women as victimized, dependent, and passive recipients of the organization's services (Freedman 2007; Rainbird 2011; Szczepanikova 2009). However, my research indicates that the NGOs in this study have devised ways to overcome the challenges of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures as they value the immigrant women participants more and view their feedback as vital to the functioning of the organization. The staff members in these organizations are less likely to operate with victimized constructions of the immigrant women. Rather, through incorporating the women's experiences and opinions into the organizations' programs and activities, the staff members of these organizations move beyond binary and homogenous constructions of the women as disempowered and receivers of assistance. Consequently, the staff members perceive the immigrant women as capable as they demonstrate leadership skills and adopt empowering roles within their community and family.

These issues of accountability are important and they need to be addressed as NGOs operate within an increasingly interconnected and globalized world that is economically and ideologically neoliberal. Neoliberal forms of empowerment that emphasize self-sufficiency and individualism are present in the NGOs in this study. However, despite the influence of neoliberalism, my research indicates that women

participants in these Kansas City based NGOs experience processes of empowerment that counter neoliberal forms of individualism and self-sufficiency. For example, the organizations in this study fostered community involvement, which was a source of empowerment for the immigrant women as their social involvement improved their quality of life, cultivated leadership skills, and gave them an opportunity to expand their roles beyond caregiver in the family.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study provides important insights regarding the functioning of NGOs in a global, neoliberal age as well as an increased understanding of staff and participant relationships within bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations. However, the findings from this study lead to limited conclusions. The organizations within this study do not represent all NGOs and the immigrant women participants do not represent all women migrating and resettling in various cities in the United States and the global North. Therefore, more research is necessary in order to further substantiate my findings and claims.

*First*, NGOs vary greatly in size, scope, affiliations with other agencies, and funding agencies. The three organizations in my study are not representative of the diverse range and scope of NGOs on the global stage. My research does not aim to make more generalized claims about NGOs based on the three organizations in this study. In order to further understand how neoliberal cutbacks and neoliberal ideologies affect the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of NGOs, my research would have to include an analysis of a larger number of organizations. For future

research, I would not only incorporate more organizations, but my sample of NGOs would also be equally representative of organizations that are small, mid-sized, and larger in terms of number of staff employed and number of participants served. These comparisons would provide better insight into how bureaucracy and hierarchy function within NGOs as well as how the staff members in NGOs deal with the challenges inherent in the hierarchical structure of organizations.

*Second*, the immigrant women respondents in my study are not representative of all immigrant women in the global North. This study primarily focuses on immigrant women from Burma and Mexico. Future research would benefit from sampling from a more varied and diverse immigrant population.

*Third*, although this study analyzes the creative and innovative ways that the organizations find to overcome problems emerging from the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of organizations, more research is necessary to identify the ongoing challenges that remain for these organizations. Although current staff may be more reluctant to speak as openly and candidly about impediments within the organization, speaking with staff members that have recently left the organization or are no longer employed by the organization may be helpful in gaining better insight into the operation of the NGO. Also, spending more time within each organization would provide deeper understanding of the dynamics of the relationships within these NGOs. Similarly, when assessing the participants responses regarding the organizations' accountability to their needs, it would be useful to expand the snowball sample to incorporate participants that are no longer involved within the organization's programs and activities. When accessing these

respondents, it would be important to conduct interviews with those who left the NGO because of their family obligations and work schedules and those who left the NGO because of disenchantment with the operation of the organization's programs and activities.

The purpose of this study is to explore how NGOs contribute to immigrant women's experiences of empowerment despite the challenges of bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational structures. While most studies about hierarchy and bureaucracy in NGOs are about organizations operating in the global South, my research contributes to existing literature by focusing on NGOs in the global North as they serve immigrant women from the global South. In addition, it expands upon the existing literature on NGOs and the immigrant population as it illustrates innovative and creative ways to counter unequal power relations between staff members and immigrant clients and other challenges inherent in bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations. Further research, therefore, is necessary to provide a more thorough understanding of how broader global, neoliberal forces shape the everyday, lived practices of women from the global South as they relocate to the global North.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### Questions for NGOs' Staff Members

- 1) What is your age? What is your educational level?
- 2) What is the history of your organization? How was it established? Why was it originally established?
- 3) What is your role in the organization?
- 4) How are the day-to-day operations of your organization structured? Is there a chain of command? If so, please describe.
- 5) What would you say are the main goals of your organization for the immigrant women that attend? Which ones do you feel you are meeting most effectively and why?
  - a. Do you feel empowerment is important to these immigrant women? If so, why?
- 6) What are the different forms of assistance your organization receives? (For example, financial, volunteer labor, donations in the form of materials and supplies.)
  - a. How effective are these forms of assistance in helping you achieve your organization's goals for immigrant women?
- 7) What groups of immigrant women does your organization hope to serve? How many immigrant women are involved in your organization?
  - a. What types of programs and activities do you have for these women?
  - b. What are the roles of these immigrant women in your organization?
- 8) How have you found is the best way to reach this population to offer them these services? Especially women, if they are often a more isolated part of the immigrant population?
- 9) How has your organization developed these programs and activities? Who is involved in the creation and implementation of these programs?
- 10) I know every organization faces challenges – what have been some of the ones your organization has encountered as it has developed its programs?
- 11) How do you think immigrant women perceive your organization?
- 12) What are some of the messages you hope to communicate to immigrant women through the activities of your organization?
- 13) What do you hope to learn from immigrant women through the programs and activities of your organization?
- 14) I would like to continue this conversation with other staff members. Is there anyone that you would recommend I speak with or think would be willing to speak with me?

### Questions for Immigrant Women

- 1) How long have you been living in Kansas City?
- 2) Did you live in any other cities in the United States before coming to Kansas City?
- 3) What is your age?
- 4) What type of education have you had?
- 5) How long have you been involved in the organization?
- 6) How did you find out about the organization?
- 7) What types of activities do you participate in within the organization?
  - a. What role do you play in these activities?
  - b. How has your role in the organization changed over time?
- 8) How do you feel these activities benefit you?
  - a. Specifically, how has your involvement in this organization helped your situation as you resettle in Kansas City?
  - b. How has your involvement impacted your family life?
- 9) How do you feel your experiences as an immigrant are represented in the organization?
- 10) What ways do you feel you are becoming more active and involved within your organization?
- 11) Do you feel your opinions and ideas are becoming a part of the organization's activities and programs? If so, in what way?
  - a. Do you make suggestions to the organization? If so, what suggestions do you make?
  - b. Does the organization ask you for your opinions? If so, in what way?
- 12) Since you have been involved in the organization, are they doing more things for immigrant women? If so, what are they doing?
- 13) Do you feel you are participating more within your community? If so, in what ways?
- 14) Do you know of any other women in the organization that you think would be willing to speak with me?

**APPENDIX B**  
**PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES**

**Table 1. Immigrant Women Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Male or Female</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Married?</b>	<b>Children?</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
#1	Female	22-36	Yes	Yes	High school	N/A
#2	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	High school	Cleaning offices/homes
#3	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	High school	N/A
#4	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Some college	Administrative Assistant
#5	Female	22-36	Yes	Yes	High school	Cleaning offices/homes
#6	Female	22-36	Yes	Yes	Primary school	Laundromat
#7	Male	22-36	Yes	Yes	Primary school	Laundromat
#8	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	College graduate	Cleaning office/homes
#9	Male	36-54	Yes	Yes	College graduate	Cleaning offices/homes
#10	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	N/A	Farmer
#11	Female	22-36	Yes	Yes	N/A	Farmer
#12	Female	36-54	Yes	No	College graduate	Seasonal employee



<b>Participant</b>	<b>Male or Female</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Married?</b>	<b>Children?</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
#13	Male	36-54	Yes	No	High school	Soap factory employee
#14	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Some High school	Farmer
#15	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Primary school	Farmer
#16	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Primary school	Farmer
#17	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Primary school	Farmer
#18	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Primary school	N/A
#19	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	Primary school	N/A
#20	Female	36-54	Yes	Yes	N/A	Soap factory employee
#21	Female	22-36	Yes	Yes	High school	Farmer
#22	Male	22-36	Yes	Yes	High school	Meat packing plant employee

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